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CHUTZPA + MAZEL + ITALY = SURVIVING THE HOLOCAUST

The biographical tale of Rudolf and Blanka Kandel

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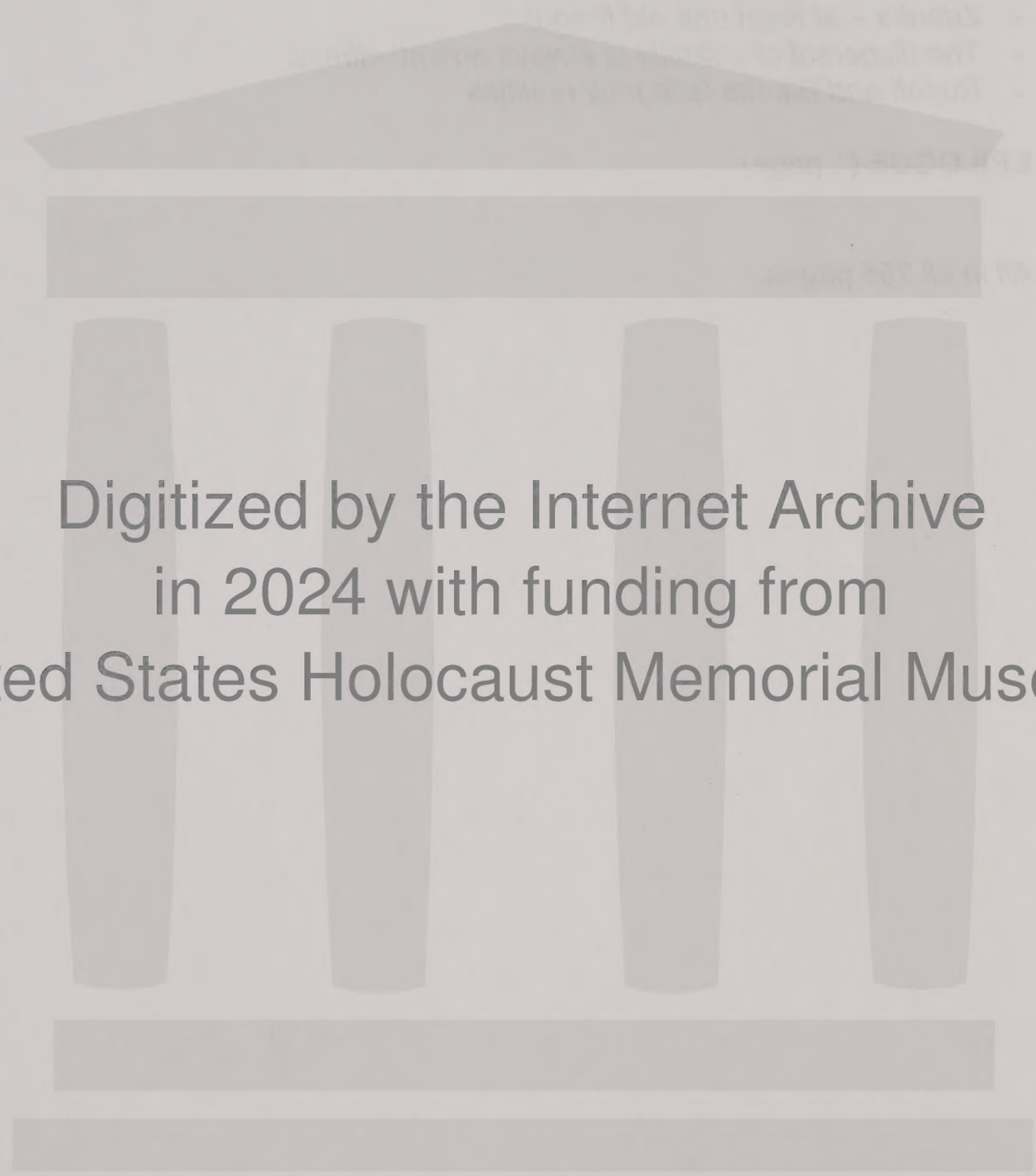

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A SHORT INTRODUCTION

Whenever we look at modern history, we do it with bifocals.

We have been taught to bring into focus figures and facts, events and statistics, long-term trends and sudden ruptures, patterns of context and isolated stories.
That is the substance thousands of books are filled with. We might call it the "objective" focus on modern history - although, as we all know, the inevitable selection of facts in the unending abundance of reality distorts that objectivity.

But there is a remarkably different way to look on modern history as well. All of us have lived through some periods of the recent past. The ensuing treasure of our personal experience may be small; but it has shaped us. It overlaps the facts and the figures. We might call it the "subjective" focus on modern history. And we should not shy away from it under the claim of "objectivity". Our experience is not opposed to historic reality. It is part of that reality.

In this sense we all are "Children of the Twentieth Century". And some of our contemporaries or recent ancestors have gained their personal experience in quite exceptional circumstances.

Walter Lahnstein, my father, comes to my mind. He was born in 1893. When he had reached the age of 18, Imperial Germany was at the peak of her power. When he was 21, he was drafted into the army to fight the First World War. For more than four years he had to serve in an artillery battalion. When he was 29, he finished his studies and became a medical doctor. He married when he was 43 and was the father of four sons. He died in 1946, only 53 years old.
He had seen the Germany of Emperor Wilhelm II, of President Friedrich Ebert, of Adolf Hitler and of the Allies. He had taken an active part in two World Wars and had seen all his traditional, nationalist convictions shattered to pieces.

Take my son Florian now. He was born in Düsseldorf, Germany, in1965. During the past 36 years of his life he has lived in Brussels, Cologne, New York, Hamburg and London. Belgium, Germany, the United States of America, Great Britain – all are stable democracies, all are marked by flourishing economies and open societies. He did not have to serve in any army.

His liberal convictions have been tested from time to time; however, they remain intact to this very day. They were never invalidated by historic circumstances.

And some of us have gone through and survived the greatest drama mankind has ever witnessed – the Shoah, this cold-blooded extermination of the European Jewry on the hands of the Nazis and their henchmen.
The "modern history" of these people is like nobody else's. It eludes any comparison. Their "facts and figures" are as completely different as are their personal experiences.

My Jewish father-in-law, Rudolf Kandel, was born in 1920 in what was then the "Kingdom of the Serbs, the Croats and the Slovenes". It would become Yugoslavia some years later. When he was 18, Germany had swallowed Austria. When he was 21, his country fell to Nazi aggression. As a Jew, he had to flee Yugoslavia and his hometown Zagreb. He hid in Italy. When he was 24, he and his wife Blanka – only 21 by then – joined the non-fighting units of Marshal Tito's partisan army. They completed their studies after the war. Rudolf became a medical doctor and Blanka a pharmacist. In 1966 they left communist Yugoslavia and live in Hamburg since then.
They have survived the Shoah, but more than six million of their Jewish brothers and sisters have not. They have been slaughtered.

During the last years I have written down the story of Blanka and Rudolf Kandel, concentrating on those absolutely extraordinary years of the Second World War. I want to tell it now.
It is a story of humiliation and glory, of deep humanity (no praise is loud enough for many people who have helped them, especially in Italy!) and utter bestiality, of cunning and desperation, of unbelievable luck and an admirable survival instinct.
I have done my very best to tell this story faithfully. All events and facts are "historical" in the sense that they have been encountered and lived through by Rudolf and Blanka, their families and their friends. As for the thoughts and the discussions I had to dig into the characters of the protagonists and to imagine what they might have pondered or said under the circumstances.

If I have accompanied the course of events by repeated glimpses on what I have called the "objective" focus on history, I have not done so to drown the particular picture in the more general one.
I have done so to juxtapose both pictures. At times there is a junction between them.

More often than not story and History unfold on two clearly distinct levels. Such a juxtaposition should allow us to render the particular picture in a way, which might foster a broader understanding of it.

A broader understanding means, however, that reality with its unbelievable twists and turns is being given up for a well-structured sequence of events by which we create a "virtual reality".
Amos Oz, the great Israeli novelist, told me once: " Reality in its unlimited wealth is 'unrealistic' in the sense that it demands too much from imagination. The minds of the writer and of the reader work differently. They look for a 'built' reality in which they don't lose themselves".

So what is historical reality in the end? The undeniable trends, facts and figures? The mirror of our individual experience? A sequence of accidents? The interplay of all these forces?
I don't know. To this day, nobody has shown me an irreproachable focus on History. I can only hope that my way of looking at things is met with interest.

I am deeply grateful to Rudolf and Blanka, my parents-in-law, to whom this book is dedicated. Their recount, gathered in long interviews, constitutes the base of this book. My heartfelt thanks go to Zdenka Novak and to Zdenka whom I have met in Haifa and who added their personal stories. They go to Sophia Kandel as well who has provided me with valuable details from far away Mexico City.
And I am very, very grateful to my wife Sonja as well. She has accompanied my work with a lot of encouragement and patience. Furthermore, he has helped me with her critical remarks and important corrections.

Finally, we must never forget a simple and tragic truth about the Shoah:

Only the survivors can tell their story!

And the stories of the survivors bear witness to all those who have been killed. Let their martyrdom be held sacred forever!

(Final Status before linguistic control: February,2002)

TWO ALMOST NORMAL JEWISH FAMILIES

The Kandels

Kandel is a midsize town in southwestern Germany, marked by wine growing, artisans and small industry. It is located in the Palatinate area, not far away from the western banks of the Rhine River and close to some of the most important Jewish centers of former times.

The center of the old town consists of a slightly winding street, bordered by two long rows of farm houses with big, closed entrances to their courtyards. They are adorned by wisterias and ivy. The main square is dominated by the town hall and a rather big church. Somewhere around here, Jews must have lived once. However, if you travel there today, you won't find any traces left. There is no synagogue in Kandel, and even local historians can't point to a former one.
Yet, the Palatinate and the adjoining regions are the true homeland of German Jewry. Most probably, the first Jewish communities flourished there already in Roman times. Later on, in the early Middle Ages, the neighboring cities of Worms and Speyer in particular grew into important centers of Jewish life, of Jewish teaching and learning. Famous rabbis such as Moshe Bar Yekutiel, Salomo Ben Isaak or Meir Ben Baruch have come from this area. The old synagogue in Speyer and the venerable cemetery in Worms, the oldest in Europe, still give testimony to this great era of Jews in Germany.

And – the origins of Yiddish lie exactly here, along the beautiful banks of the Rhine and the Mosel Rivers. Yiddish stems from the dialect of this area, which, together with Hebrew and Slavic words should become the mother tongue of the Ashkenazi Jews later on.

But then, from the end of the Middle Ages onward, the Jews of the Palatinate and of the Rhineland were expelled from their old centers. Many have been killed in sudden outbursts of Christian rage, but most of them left for Central and Eastern Europe. As it was the habit in that time, they adopted the name of their old communities as soon as they arrived in a new one:

the Landauers, the Wormsers, the Frankenthals, the Oppenheimers, the Frankfurters, the Mannheimers. They formed the core group of Ashkenazi Jewry.

Amongst them were the Kandels. Their first odyssey ended somewhere in Galicia. In the eighteenth century this Polish-speaking region came under Austrian rule. This happened primarily in Empress MariaTheresia's time.

As a consequence, Rudolf Kandel's ancestors had been born as citizens of the Austrian empire. They had lived in a relatively quiet period of a first Jewish emancipation and of gradual civic integration. One of the great-grandfathers still had been the cantor of a sizeable Jewish community. The Jews of Galicia lived simple and inconspicuous lives in rural areas. From time to time they became the victims of cruel pogroms.

Rudolf has practically no knowledge about his grandparents. They all had died well ahead of his birth or when he still was very young. He remembers, however, that the grandfather on his mother's side had been the owner of a rather big department store in Bielsko – Biala or Bielitz, as it was called at that time, one of the more important industrial towns of the area, situated on the border between Galicia and Austrian Silesia. This poor man committed some managerial blunders, went bankrupt and died from the ensuing grief. Some years later, his widow took the children and went to Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Rudolf's father Mavro was born in Przemysl in 1889. From this major Galician center he came to Vienna with his parents as well – during the first years of the Twentieth Century. Even to Jews, the Austrian capital offered more than acceptable prospects for higher education. Mavro gained access to a renowned commercial school, finished it with first-class exams, and joined the staff of Wiener Bankverein, one of the most important financial institutions of the Austrian Empire. He must have been 19 or 20 years old at that time.
He had a lot of energy and the necessary wits to climb the steps of the career – ladder very quickly. At the tender age of 25 already he was sent to the Czech part of the Empire. He was to serve there as one of the three general managers in the Karlsbad or Karlovy Vary branch of the bank.
By the way, Rudolf's father was called Mavro when they were living in Zagreb.

He was called Mauro when they had to hide in Italy later on. But his real name must have been Moritz or Mauritius. Apparently, traditional Christian names were a deliberate symbol of emancipated and well-to-do Jewish families of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. I do not want to create confusion; that is why I will call him Mavro for the rest of this book.

Mavro, in spite of all his professional ambitions, read a lot about politics and about history, Jewish history in particular. He became one of the early and ardent Zionists. He had studied the writings of Theodore Herzl and had caught fire. With all the idealism of youth he was convinced that a real Zionist should combine his Jewish heritage with a sound and broad basis of general education and knowledge. Mavro read and studied, listened and wrote.

Later on in his life he was known to be one of the most educated and learned people around. In 1913 he was chosen as a delegate to the Eleventh World Zionist Congress, which was being held in Vienna. He met people there who would become very famous later on, such as Haim Weizman, the first President of Israel, or Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher.
Yet, this Congress turned out to be much more important for quite a different reason:
Mavro met his wife Cecilia at this event. She was one of the secretaries of the congress, which constituted quite an achievement for a woman. Much to their surprise they found out that they originated from the same region in Galicia and had many common friends in the capital.
They shared the same convictions, stuck together, discussed, dreamed - and fell in love with each other. For the next two or three years they maintained a regular contact whenever Mavro could travel to his bank's main seat, and then he proposed Cecilia.
She accepted and her mother agreed as well.
As soon as Mavro had definitely secured his position with Wiener Bankverein and earned enough money to sustain the needs of a family, they married. This happened in Karlovy Vary, in 1916, in the middle of the First World War. At that time Mavro was 27 and Cecilia was 35, eight years older than her husband.

There is a photo of Mavro in my wife's office. It shows the serious, very honest and somewhat skeptical face of a wise and incorruptible man.

With his gray, receding hair, a closely cropped moustache and a pair of large, thinly rimmed glasses he looks like a university professor, a medical doctor – or the old-fashioned director of an old-fashioned bank. And that is what he would become later on.
Such a man would never take things lightly. He would stick to law and order in the best sense of the term. And he would feel responsible for those around him, his family in particular.

Rudolf's mother, Cecilia or Cilly as her family and close friends used to call her, was born as Cecilia Welczer in Bielsko – Biala in 1881. We do not know if her mother left Galicia because of her husband's bankruptcy or if she was forced to leave in the wake of one of the pogroms. Anyhow, when Cecilia came to Vienna with her mother, she had to earn her living quite early. The daughter of a rather poor Jewish widow could not be sent to the best schools, let alone to an institute of higher learning. Nevertheless, Cecilia became a well-educated young lady, thanks to the constant efforts of her mother and some friends. She was a welcome guest in her friends' homes, proved to be very intelligent and was involved in the debates of the early Zionists from the very beginning. For some years Cecilia worked as a governess in well-to-do Jewish families.

For an ambitious young woman political activities had to make up for a real professional career in the early Twentieth Century, since, in Imperial Austria as well as in almost all other countries of Europe almost all careers were reserved for men.

And then she met Mavro. After the marriage they stayed in Karlovy Vary. They started to build their household, and practical necessities gradually pushed Zionist idealism to the back burner of their minds.
For unknown reasons Mavro had not done any military service when his age group was called to duty. Given his age he was not drafted into the Austrian army during the First World War, either.

Sophia, Rudolf's elder sister, was born in Karlovy Vary in March 1918, the last year of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Shortly afterwards the Kandels had to move. It was their first move – with many more to follow. They went to Zagreb, at that time still called Agram. Mavro had been asked to be the director of the bank's operations in Croatia and Slovenia. For a young man of 29, that was an extraordinary achievement, and Cecilia was proud of her husband.

Only a few months later the First World War I came to its dramatic end and the Austro-Hungarian Empire imploded. Agram became Zagreb. and some former Imperial areas on the Balkans, together with Serbia, became the "Kingdom of the Serbs, the Croats and the Slovenes", which in turn would be re-named as "Kingdom of Yugoslavia" in 1929.
Mavro, Cecilia and her first baby were not really affected by all this turmoil. He retained his position and was even able to build on it. The bank changed its name officially, but everyone continued to call it "Wiener Bankverein".
And Cecilia cared for her little daughter whom she was particularly proud of, since – with 37 years – she had given birth at a rather later age. Rudolf was born two years later, in January 1920.

Cecilia Kandel must have been a remarkable person. All the photos show a strong face with big, dark eyes, which convey an impressive degree of energy and attention. Perhaps she has not been pretty in the general sense of the word. But she was rather tall, about the size of her husband or even a little bit more, and everything - from the black hair to her erect posture and the simple dresses she liked to wear – seemed to support those dark eyes with their all-encompassing glance.
Cecilia commanded respect. And she knew it.

There were not many uncles or aunts in Rudolf's family. Many emancipated and liberal Jewish families of that time didn't want a big number of children apparently.

However, there was uncle Ignatz, his father's older brother. Ignatz Kandel should exert a considerable influence on Rudolf later on. He undoubtedly was the most brilliant member of an already well-educated clan.
As a young man he had studied „ all sorts of nonsensical economic and social sciences" in Vienna. Anyhow, that was the way his brother Mavro used to put it.
Around the turn of the century Ignatz had come under the spell of Karl Kautsky, the famous representative of orthodox Marxism in the ideological battles of the Socialist Movement. Ignatz had helped the great man with his articles and speeches.
He became an ardent socialist and internationalist. And although Karl Kautsky taught his own and pure brand of socialism, although Ignatz was marked by him in his thoughts and beliefs, he sided with the Communists after the October Revolution in Russia.

Some years later „Komintern“, the international support and propaganda organization for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was founded. Ignatz was thrilled by what he read in one of Komintern's pamphlets. To „fight for the downfall of the international bourgeoisie with all means, even with the help of arms“ – that seemed to be more to his liking than the theoretical concepts of his Austrian mentor. He established contact with Komintern's secret representative in Vienna.

That institution needed people like Ignatz. To the horror of his parents he left the Austrian capital, went to Moscow and started working in Komintern's central offices.

On Cecilia's side, there was uncle Adolf. Looking at an old photography Rudolf remembers what was told about him in the family:“ He was called Adolf and he looked like Adolf (Hitler, of course) with his black moustache“. Adolf Welscher died in an Austrian military hospital during the First World War. He had been a decorated officer of the Imperial army. Not many Jews had reached officer ranks, a fact, which Adolf had been very proud of. The emancipated Jews in the Austrian and the German Empires were no nationalists – with a few exceptions. But in general they were stout patriots if they were not heavily leaning to the Left.
There still are some military cemeteries, where Jewish officers and soldiers are buried next to their non-Jewish comrades. The Jews got separate burying places. But the inscriptions there are exactly the same. Like the Christians they died for “God, Emperor and Fatherland”.

And then there was aunt Lina. We do not know much of Lina Welscher. She has been a professor at Prague University and one of the first female academicians of that venerable institution. Lina has been deported in 1943 and killed in one of the extermination camps, most probably in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Finally, there were two Rosa's or Ruzha's, as they were called in the Slavic pronunciation. One was Rudolf's aunt on his father's side. He has no recollection of her, since she had died very young. The other Ruzha, Rosa Polak, an aunt on his mother's side, should play a certain role in the fate of the Kandel family later on.
Ruzha Polak looked exactly like a younger version of her sister Cecilia. And where Cecilia commanded respect, Ruzha commanded sympathy. Perhaps her personality was not as strong as the one of her elder sister.

But it was easier to get along with her as Blanka recalls vividly.
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The Selingers

The origin of this family name is a little less clear than the name of the Kandels. I assume with some reason that it was one of the family names given to Jews living in the Austrian parts of Silesia in Empress Maria Theresia's time – such as the Schlesingers or the Salingers. I am not absolutely sure about this point, however.

Anyhow, the early Selingers, Blanka's ancestors, made it to a quite different part of the Empire. They found their home in Slavonski Brod, an Austrian border town on the Sava River, in the remote south - eastern corner of Croatia. Bosnia was lying across the river, and that was very far away from Vienna, indeed.
Victor Selinger, Blanka's great-grandfather, opened his own company there – „Victor Selinger & Sons", as it would be called later on – an information bureau specializing in such fields as creditworthiness and other confidential business matters. Slavonski Brod was a small town with less than 6.000 inhabitants, but it was a station of the Sava steamers and a rather important center for the trade with Bosnia. So, there was business there.
His son Hugo took over after Victor's death. Blanka has only scarce recollections of her grandfather, since he died in 1928 when she was not yet four years old. She remembers him as a "very fine, stately man with a small moustache and a pair of pince-nez eye-glasses".

Hugo married Anica who would die of a cardiac infarction in 1939. Ancient photos show Anica Selinger as a strong and beautiful woman. Until her death she was the dominating personality in the Selinger family. She owned fifty percent of the business interest in "Victor Selinger & Sons", but her strong and somewhat obstinate character was even more determining.

After the death of her husband she had moved into a beautiful apartment and enjoyed the help of her own maid. Each year she used to take the waters at Karlovy Vary.
And when Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia in 1938, she went to a Yugoslav spa, Topusko, where she died in her hotel room following an

overdose of hot mud baths. She was brought to Zagreb and is buried there.

Zivko, Blanka's father, has been born in 1897. That happened still in remote Slavonski Brod, on the banks of the Sava River.
But only a few years later, Hugo Selinger moved the family and his business to Agram. Even if it was not Vienna, the capital of the Empire, Agram – later on Zagreb - was at least the capital of Croatia.
It was a lively city of some 65.000 inhabitants and with a lot of economic activities. It boasted of an elegant theatre, a few hotels and art galleries, a philharmonic orchestra, two railway stations and a tramway system. There was a sizeable, thriving Jewish community with a large synagogue situated right in the center of the Lower Town. This part of Zagreb had been laid out rather lavishly after the heavy earthquake of 1880.
Hugo's business was booming and he hoped for further growth in Agram. And his wife had always wanted to live in a larger and more exciting place than in a sleepy border town, adorned by an impressive fortress, but devoid of any entertainment. Who knows – perhaps it has been Anica who was the driving force behind this move.

Zivko, a Slavic version of Vitalis, a famous catholic saint, served in the Austrian army in the last three years of the First World War. He fought the major battles in the Dolomiti area as well as those in the Isonzo region. He survived with minor injuries and came home as a decorated non-commissioned officer. The families do not know if he ever met Adolf Welscher, Rudolf's uncle. However, when they discussed the issue later on they liked to have two officers in the family!
After the war, Zivko finished his last year of high school. He started to study medicine, but gave it up after a year or so. He took some management courses. And then, Hugo took him into his company as a junior partner. This was the real beginning of „Victor Selinger & Sons". Zivko will accompany us through most of this book.

Blanka remembers her father as a friendly, likeable and affable man with a character that might have been a little weak on the edges. He idolized his wife and his children. However, when he had to take over the company, he was a good manager and developed the family business with considerable success.

Zivko had a younger brother, Victor, born in 1908. Victor did not want to enter his father's company after he had gained some practical experience there.
Instead, he specialized in international hauling and in commodity trade. He joined the well-known Schenker Company as an international representative; it is in that capacity that we will meet him again.

And then there was Egon Polak. He had no family tie with Ruzha Polak, Rudolf's aunt. Polak was a very common name. In a pejorative way it simply indicated Jews from Polish territories.
Egon was a remote relative of the Selinger family whose parents had died very early. The Selingers had adopted the small boy. He grew up in the family like a real brother. Egon entered "Victor Selinger & Sons" as a second junior partner, being absolutely equal to Zivko.
He was very active in Zagreb's Jewish community and finished to serve it as one of their board members. As we will see later on, it was him who saved part of the family in the dramatic weeks of 1941.
In May 1943, Egon Polak has been deported to Auschwitz - Birkenau, together with almost all the Jewish leaders of Zagreb and Osijek. He went into the gas chambers.

Blanka's mother Bertha came from the Schatteles family. The Schatteles' originated from the Hungarian speaking Batchka area, close to the Vojvodina region in what is Serbia today. Flourishing Jewish communities had been founded there in the eighteenth century already.

Not much is known of the Schatteles' with their Yiddish-sounding name. Blanka's grandfather Michael had worked as a land survey agent for the Austrian authorities. He died very early. Her grandmother Lina left the Batchka afterwards and came to Zagreb. Blanka has not seen her as regularly as she met her other grandmother.

Lina has been sent to the Auschwitz extermination camp in 1943, most probably with the same transport Egon Polak was a part of.

Bertha Schatteles, Blanka's mother, was born in late 1899. However, she preferred to give the year 1900 as her year of birth. Blanka remembers her saying: „ It simply looked better if you were born in the first year of a new century instead of the last year of an old century". Well, this small symbol of all-too-human vanity hints to a complicated character.

And indeed, all those who have known her remember her as a very strong and opinionated woman. She liked to dominate everybody around her and to be the boss whenever possible. She kept Zivko under her thumb to a considerable extent – with the notable exception of all business matters where Zivko would not tolerate any intrusion. It was only later on that she changed – when her children and her son-in-law would stand up to her.

Zivko Selinger and Bertha Schatteles married in Zagreb in 1922. They had two children. Blanka, born in 1924, was followed by Otto, born in 1929.

I particularly like their official wedding photo. Zivko must have been one of the most attractive young men in Zagreb's Jewish community. He looks quite like a successful entrepreneur, but with his well kept hair, his aquiline nose and his radiating smile he could have passed as an Italian actor as well.
And Bertha is all beauty and pride. She looks directly into the camera as if she wanted to say : "We will make it in life! And I will see to it".

Bertha had three sisters whom she constantly tried to dominate as well. There was aunt Blanka, who died before „our" Blanka's birth and had given her her name. There was aunt Zenka, a highly gifted tailor who married uncle Mirko Singer. And there was aunt Böshka who married Paul Lantos, a Hungarian Jew.
We will meet them again as well.

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So much about the family history of the Kandels and the Selingers.

The coincidences and similarities within and between these families are striking. But nothing is extraordinary here! At that time, there were many other Jewish families with roughly the same history.
They all originated in the Eastern, Slavic provinces of the Austrian Empire. They all were ambitious, industrious and intelligent to a very large extent. They all wanted to leave behind them the constrictions of their shtetls and the terror of intermittent pogroms. They all wanted to lead a successful and undisturbed life in the cities. Almost all of them achieved exactly that.

Most of the Kandels, the Welczers, the Selingers and the Schatteles' were marked individualists and strong, even obstinate characters. They were ready to sacrifice traditional forms of Jewish bonds for the integration into a modern bourgeois society. And the Zionist minority among them was attracted by Herzl's vision of a radically new Jewish community, as long as this attraction lasted. Anyhow, nobody felt any nostalgia while thinking about the old life in Galicia, in the border areas of Croatia or in the remote villages of the Batchka.

They flowed together in Zagreb, a surprisingly cosmopolitan place for a city of its size. In the first three decades of the Twentieth Century they would experience the pinnacle of Jewish self-esteem, creativity, freedom and integration. They led the lives of normal citizens, mundane and a trifle superficial, absolutely patriotic and very interested culturally.
They would have found peers in every city of Europe, from France to Germany, from Denmark to Italy. It was a good period of Jewish history. There was not much to really complain about.

And then, in the Forties, Fate struck with the speed of a lightning and with utmost cruelty. There had been clear signs on the wall in the Thirties already, but they were not being taken seriously enough. For the Kandels and the Selingers the history of a century was undone in a few weeks! Individual destinies, varied and complex as they had been, were destroyed, compressed like water in a gigantic funnel. All differentiations and self-deceptions, cherished over a long period of time, disappeared in front of a simple, brutal and common recognition: A Jew is a Jew is a Jew...

It was then that basic questions had to be formulated, that basic answers had to be found.
But we are not there yet.

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A GUARDED AND EASY-GOING YOUTH

Rudolf

Rudolf was born in Zagreb on January 2, 1920. He was named after a famous archduke and crown prince of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the nineteenth century.

As it happens to many of us he does not have a clear recollection of his early childhood.
There was the impressive apartment with its many rooms, in a downtown house on Boskoviceva Street, close to the big park-like area, which extended from Jelacicev square to the main station . Wiener Bankverein was doing very well, and the bank could afford to buy one of the most beautiful houses in town and to let the apartments to its directors.
For a young boy such an apartment is always filled with unknown angles, discoveries, surprises and secrets. Even more impressive was the bank building itself, just a five-minutes walk from their home. Sometimes Rudolf would accompany his father on his way to work, obediently holding the hand of a nanny.

There was Sophia, the elder sister who constantly tried to act as a mother to him as all elder sisters in the world try to do. A younger brother is a lot better than even the most charming doll! And when she was with her girlfriends, such as Zdenka Slovak or Mira Hoffmann-Sandor, Rudolf was completely excluded from their small secrets.
Not that he was particularly curious about what these girls were doing. But he felt somehow inferior to them. There is a photograph, which shows both Sophia and Rudolf during those years. The difference between the two is remarkable.
Here is the elder sister, composed and sure of herself – as if she knew already that she would grow into a woman of exceptional beauty. And there is the younger brother, shy and a little bit lost. He had not yet found his place in the world.

There were the parents. Their daily life with its many out-of-house activities remained somewhat mysterious to Rudolf. And when they went out to the opera or another formal occasion, he watched mother's elegant dress and father's serious looks with awe.

Indeed, there was – as in so many other bourgeois families - a well-cultivated distance between parents and children.
A somewhat higher degree of loneliness was balanced by an attentive care once the family members were together.

Thank God, there were the nannies to fill some of the gaps. The Kandels had more than one person to help them at home. And that was not extraordinary at all. Labor costs were very low and helping hands were absolutely affordable. If they were qualified and well treated, they almost formed a part of the families and stayed with them for decades.
And there were the sunny afternoons in the alleys of Zrinjevac Park where Rudolf, slightly overdressed (which he thoroughly loathed as all overdressed boys in the world do), would go to meet other children.
The nannies in their cotton blouses, their well-ironed aprons and their long skirts would chat or giggle about the young men hanging around.
The young men would do what young men always do: brag and put on a more or less ridiculous show. The children would play their noisy games, keeping the nannies suitably occupied.
And when the brass bands started their afternoon concerts, they would all gather around the bandstand and enjoy popular music.

At Zrinjevac Park all the children were equal. There were no invisible walls. No distinctions were made between Jewish and non-Jewish children, between Croatian or Bosnian nannies, between Catholic or Orthodox youngsters. During childhood Sophia and Rudolf didn't even really know what it meant to be a Jew.
At home, there were only scarce signs of Jewish tradition. There was a mezuzah at the entrance door of the apartment; there was a beautiful silver menorah on a windowsill in the dining room. These are all tangible Jewish symbols Rudolf remembers. Sabbath was not observed in a strict manner. As a kind of secular reminder the only formal dinner of the week would take place on Friday evenings. And of course, daddy's day off would be a Sunday and not a Saturday.
The important Jewish holidays were celebrated, however. Rudolf remembers the Seder evenings in particular. He remembers the festive atmosphere at an evening when even he would not protest his formal

dress. The venerable Passover texts were read and explained to him. He had to recite the Ma Nishtana questions and was rewarded with a sip of wine. He remembers Purim with its small gifts, its merry songs and its exuberance; he remembers the lighting of the candles during the Hanukah period, and the story of the Maccabees was the first one to stick in his mind.
Some years later, he would learn some Hebrew and prepare his Bar Mitzvah, which was celebrated joyfully and with many presents. But then he forgot his Hebrew rather quickly, and Yiddish was not at all spoken at home. Obviously, this beautiful language seemed quite backward-minded to emancipated and class-conscious people such as Cecilia and Mavro.

There was a Jewish elementary school in Zagreb, located on the compound of the Jewish community on Palmoticeva Street. This institution had been established for pupils in the first four scholastic years.
However, when Rudolf reached schooling age his parents did not send him there. They had decided against it, because this school was „too religious“ for their taste. They did not want the rabbi becoming responsible for the education of their son.
There were local elementary schools as well, but in the beginning Rudolf did not attend those either. At home, their mother tongue was German and this language was not spoken in the Croat elementary schools. Therefore he grew up with nanny – teachers who used to live in their house. Compulsory school education had not yet been established at that time.

By the way, a few other Jewish families did so as well.
The Steiners for instance, good friends of the Kandels, took pride in employing Mrs. Cohn, a Jewish “Fräulein” from Berlin, to teach their daughter Zdenka. A German nanny for Jewish kids in Croatia – that certainly was something to be envious of! All in all, these nanny-teachers were reputed to be better qualified than their poorly educated and paid colleagues in the public schools. Well, Imperial Austria had not left a rich educational legacy in her remote provinces. And an independent Croat education system was just in the starting blocks.

With the teacher at home and the nanny looking after him in the afternoons Rudolf had not many opportunities to get around. Most of his playfellows lived in the same house or somewhere next door.

Since the house he lived in belonged to Wiener Bankverein it was no wonder that some of his friends were the children of other managers working there. Some were Jewish, some not. They all were relatively respectful. Mavro was the boss at the bank, after all!

However, two years later and at the age of eight the nanny-teacher had to return home and he switched to a local elementary school.
His parents had made sure that even this learning institution was not quite „normal". It was called a „ preparandia institution". It was there that the young Croat professors and teachers gained their first practical experience.
These were young and ambitious pedagogues who – with their knack for modern methods - had made this school the best one in town. And there were lessons in German as well.
Rudolf enjoyed to finally reach beyond the well-protected realm of his home. He got along well with his new mates, learned to improve his Croatian quite quickly and became a brilliant pupil. And it was only now that he noticed some religious and cultural differences between him and his Christian classmates.
Some of the girls were wearing small silver crosses around their necks, and a large wooden one with the crucified Christ adorned the entrance hall of his school. When he asked his parents about it, they explained patiently that most of the people in Zagreb were Christians, but that they shared the common belief in the one God, in Abraham, Salomon and David. They were just a little different, but they were in no way superior – that was all.
Rudolf accepted this explanation without much ado. And he enjoyed the free hours he and some other Jewish pupils had when the Catholics had to have their religious education.

No, many of the Jews in Zagreb had no scruples whatsoever to send their children to Christian schools – provided that these schools offered a good education.
Take Zdenka Slovak, Sophia's friend, as an example. She was sent to the "Deutsche Evangelische Bürgerschule", a Protestant institution, which was known for its good teaching.

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When he was ten years old, Rudolf entered the "Humanistisches Gymnasium", Zagreb's epitome of classical learning.

Before the war, it had been modeled exactly on the pattern of Vienna's famous high schools. And especially the elder teachers and the director jealously stuck to this tradition even now that the Austro – Hungarian Empire had gone already for more than a decade.
Such a "Gymnasium" was a very strenuous affair. Classical Humanities and everything, which comes with it like Latin and Greek used to be very boring for a vital boy, like Rudolf. But there was no alternative, and he loved French, History and above all the physical exercises. He continued to be an excellent student.

And then, in the early Thirties Rudolf became aware of the first outbursts of anti-Semitism.
That was well before the radical Ustasha would come to power. This earlier anti- Semitism was of clerical origin. His Christian classmates reminded him time and again that the Jews had delivered Christ to the cross and that they would burn in hell for it. They used to say: „ Rudolf, we don't have anything against you in person. You are a very likeable fellow. But we will never forget what the Jews have done to our Lord. A real pity that you are one of them".
And outside the school building the hatred disseminated by the dull followers of a clerical fascism was to be found as well.
Rudolf noted it when he went to see a teacher who looked after his extracurricular French lessons. He had to pass through a narrow road where a right-wing Catholic newspaper was on display at one of the buildings, full of calumnies and defamations against his people.

At times he came home angry or sobbing after such incidents. His parents did their best to comfort him.
„Listen," they tried to assure him, „ don't take all that too seriously. These are dull people who don't know any better. Believe us: there will be a time when all this will be over. Human beings will consider each other just as human beings, not as Christians or Jews. And the hatred will disappear".
Rudolf had serious doubts when listening to Cecilia and Mavro. Yet, at that time he tended to believe his parents. They simply should know better! And he had only one ardent wish. He wanted to accelerate the advent of such a wonderful world!
It was only some years later that Rudolf should discover the enormous illusion his parents and himself had believed in.

Thank God – there was not only his school to balance things. There were other things in life that he liked even better.
How glad he was when he could go to the precincts of his beloved Maccabi sports association, right next to the compound of the Jewish community! And he tried to do so at least three or four times a week. In the gym he found other boys who looked at the world with the same eyes as he did. They were proud to adhere to a club, which had taken its name from the Maccabees, those famous heroes of Jewish history. There was no Christian parallel to them!

He enjoyed gymnastics in particular and showed a considerable talent in this specialty. Very soon he became the leader of his age group. He loved fencing as well, which he took up when he was only 12 years old. What a thrill to put on the elegant fencing-dress and to assert oneself through ardent bouts on the galleries of the Maccabi gymnasium! And what a pleasure to be the object of admiring looks from the girls down on the gymnastic floor!

He would never admit such a kind of pleasure. But a pleasure it was. By the way: Here at least his patronizing sister couldn't tell him anything! On top of it he was given riding lessons twice a week. An elderly cavalry officer of the former Imperial Austrian Army had stayed in Zagreb after the First World War and had kept a few horses for himself.
Rudolf liked the smell of the stable and the looks of the brown horse he cared for, cleaned and mounted. But he liked the thrill of being in the saddle and of mastering the different maneuvers a lot more than the horses themselves.

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Rudolf did not notice it, but the Jewish community in Zagreb was quite active during those years. These activities occupied his parents to quite an extent although they were not involved religiously. Cecilia helped to organize social events the proceeds of which would go to the needy. Her dinners, speakers' events and musical evenings were very well organized. And with her strong personality she made sure that everybody showed up and opened the pockets.
Mavro had joined B'nai B'rith and took an active part in all the events, which were organized by this wonderful institution. Nevertheless, both parents did their best to spend as much time as possible with their children.

And since both parents were interested intellectually and active politically, it is small wonder that Rudolf developed a societal awareness already in his early high school years.
He learned to despise the right-wing extremists of the Ustasha movement, even though this movement was not well looked at by the Yugoslav authorities. He especially loathed Ante Pavelic, the „ bloodhound“ as Rudolf used to call him later on. He was appalled by the fact that of all people this extremist agitator was linked to a Jewish woman, a Mrs. Weinberger.

He learned to observe the blatant poverty and the horrible cultural backwardness of most of his Croatian country-fellows. He noticed the sharp contrast between them and the world of wealth and culture his father and his mother had created for themselves and their family. Is it astonishing that a hotheaded youth like Rudolf developed some resentment against his own parents? Does it come as a surprise that he wanted to escape the influence of both Cecilia's and Mavro's strong personalities? Anyhow, he swore to himself do things differently.

Wasn't it laudable that he sided with the under-privileged?
He learned to disdain the repression against the Croats exercised by the Belgrade government, which was largely dominated by Serbs. Serbs held many, too many key positions in Zagreb as well. As Rudolf remembers: „ In reality, already the so-called 'Kingdom of the Serbs, the Croats and the Slovenes' was a kingdom for the Serbs at the expense of all other people living in Yugoslavia“. The constitution of this state had been promulgated on the 28th of June, 1921. The Serbs call this day "Vidovdan". It is the day when they commemorate the epic Battle of Kosovo, back in 1389.
This was only a symbol for an untenable situation. The Croats felt disadvantaged and frustrated. The discrimination against them should call for vengeance later on. And a blatant lack of education didn't help, neither in Croatia nor in Serbia, in Slovenia or in other parts of the kingdom. The Balkans belonged to the backyards of Europe, even if Zagreb constituted a noteworthy exception. And it is in the backyards that horrible thing tend to happen.

Rudolf wanted to do things differently. But how? He became acquainted with political literature; the left-wing thoughts and ideologies impressed him the most. Gradually, he became a "salon socialist" with all the idealism, the enthusiasm and the unquestioning certainty of youth.

He did not consider himself a Croat but a citizen of the world. And he hated all nationalists. He was a convinced internationalist of a socialist leaning.
These were dreams, of course. But how can you make it in life without dreams?

He was rather cautious and could be quite inward looking. On the other hand he was an optimist and developed into a daredevil. He loved life each and every day. Was it to overcome his inborn prudence and shyness? Who knows? And who of us has a personality without conflicting strains?

What he liked most, however, were practical jokes. He remembers one in particular:
When he was thirteen years old, the external walls of his high school were painted. Rudolf approached one of the painters, pointed at his bucket filled with white paint and told him firmly: „ We are going to have a math lesson now. And we all deeply dislike our professor. I am sure that he will feel disturbed by your work. He feels disturbed by almost everything".

The painter was somewhat baffled when Rudolf continued: " If he reprimands you, you should argue with him. We all feel that the re-painting of our school should proceed as quickly as possible."
Apparently, the painter got the hint and liked the story. When the professor started the lesson, he noticed that the windows were wide open. He went to close them. He noticed the painter on his ladder and started complaining about the noise, just as Rudolf had assumed previously.
The painter retorted somewhat angrily. He had to do the work he was paid for and that was it! This was just too much for an old-fashioned high-school professor. How could such an uncultivated fellow dare to argue with him, a teacher at a Gymnasium?
The Professor tried to grab the painter. The boys cheered wildly. This looked like a promising quarrel! And then, when the confusion was general, the painter took the bucket and threw it at the teacher. He missed him, but the classroom was spilled with white paint all over the floor.
Soon afterwards, Rudolf was detected as the instigator of the whole affair.

And it was only his first-class performances, which saved him from being expelled. He got no pocket money and had to stay at home for the next four weeks.

Blanka

Blanka was born in Zagreb on December 6, 1924.
She spent her whole childhood and youth in a large flat on Mazurnicev Square, right opposite of Zagreb's beautiful theater building and in the close vicinity of the university, the major high school complex and the botanical garden.
It was a very elegant apartment, occupying the whole third floor of the building. If you opened the door, you would arrive in a small reception area and then in a large anteroom, completely paneled and furnished with wooden closets. It was there that the Selinger family would have their meals. At more formal occasions the dining room would be aired, dusted and put to good use. Zivko surveyed his domestic empire from an elegant study with many books, upholstered furniture, a writing desk, an ornate reading lamp and some oriental tapestry.
There was Bertha's undisputed empire, the kitchen („ My father has never set a foot into it ", Blanka recalls), the parents' and the children's bedrooms, a tiled bathroom with an enormous stove and a maidens' room.

All in all – it was the typical domestic setup for a wealthy family.

And the preferred pastimes of both Zivko and his wife Bertha reflected their well being as well.
Blanka's mother had never thought of pursuing a professional career. A well organized marriage, a wealthy and accommodating husband, children and her home – that was her particular universe. She behaved exactly as the other ladies of Zagreb's High Society did: Manage the domestic servants, visit the weekly food market right around the corner, have some beautiful clothing tailored at her sister's dressmaking atelier, go out for a nice ladies' chat in one of the posh coffee-houses.
Zivko was kind of a technology freak instead. He brought home the newest radio sets once a year and exchanged his beloved Leica from time to time against a newer model. Besides, he liked playing the piano, painting and writing and a good deck of cards from time to time.

As it was with the Kandels, Friday evenings would always be devoted to a family meeting of the Selingers. Everybody had to come to „Grandma Anica". It was the beginning of Sabbath. However, they would not observe the traditional rules – much to the distress of the grandmother who still was a religious person.
But at least – they all had to come! Blanka remembers with a big smile: „Oh dear, if someone did not show up! Grandma would feel offended for a whole week!" And there was a "jour fixe" for Blanka and for Otto later on. They would visit Grandma Anica in the afternoon, tell her about her little adventures and be recompensed by a piece of cake and a cup of real coffee with a lot of milk.

As we have noticed already the Selingers were not a very religious Jewish family. The women would go to the synagogue, however. Zivko would pick Bertha up after the service, but he would not attend it himself. The important Jewish holidays such as Rosh Hashanah, Passover or Yom Kippur would be celebrated at home. And these were the only occasions where Bertha would do the cooking herself. The maid - servants were given a day off. Blanka loved these occasions because she felt that these were special days – and her mother was a fabulous cook.

Yes – there were the maid - servants, usually three of them. One would do the cooking, one would keep things clean and orderly and one would look after the children.
Blanka remembers two of the nurses in particular.
There was Milka, a beauty from the Dalmatian coast and a very nice young lady apparently. She laughed and sang all day long. They all loved her very much.
Unfortunately, uncle Victor became attracted to her. She fell for this man a lot older than herself, an intimate relationship followed, and Milka had to be sent away in a hurry.

And then there was Mrs. Orlova. The Soviet Communists had chased her and her husband from far away Bjelarus. They had stranded in Zagreb somehow. Mrs. Orlova, stemming from a distinguished family in Minsk, was called „ the French lady" by the Selingers. She spoke an excellent French and looked like a lady from Paris. She had to earn her living the hard way – with French lessons and nursing.

Blanka adored spending her time with Mrs. Orlova and visiting her in her tiny apartment in particular. „ It was cozier there than anywhere else in the world," she recalls.
And January 6, the day of Christmas for the Russian Orthodox community, must have been a particular experience for a young Jewish girl – with all the festive decorations, the great songs and the special cookies prepared for the event!

Blanka did not visit a Kindergarten. The nanny would take her to the parks and the botanical garden. It was there that she met with other children, just as Rudolf had done under the large, green trees of Zrinjevac Park.

When she was six years old, Blanka entered the Jewish elementary school. There were four classes of some 30 pupils each, both boys and girls. A form-mistress steered each one of the groups through this period of primary education. And there was a „very strict" rabbi who would introduce them to Jewish religion and history and would teach some Hebrew as well. But as was the case with Rudolf, Blanka has no knowledge left of this venerable language.
This school was a part of a small complex of buildings, which housed the different activities of the Jewish community. Not far away from the large and beautiful synagogue, the school, a community center and the Maccabi sports center were to be found.

Blanka had entered Maccabi when she was ten years old. Like Rudolf, she liked gymnastics very much and participated in all the displays of her group.
And she liked – although she would have never admitted it - glimpsing up to the galleries where the boys indulged in fencing, accompanied by loud orders of their trainer, shouted in French. At that time she did not know yet that Rudolf was one of those up there.
Interesting enough no outdoors – sports were practiced at the Maccabi club. Hockey was not fashionable in Croatia, basketball or volleyball were virtually unknown at that time and soccer – „ that was too dirty, too rough, too plebeian for us". This seems to be an astonishing statement; however, soccer was a workers' sport in almost all European countries at that time.

Gymnastics formed one part of Blanka's extra-curricular activities. The other part was passed in the city's school of music and dance.

She had to learn how to read and write musical notes; she had to sing and learned how to play the piano.
And as it has happened with many of us, the piano constituted a dismal experience due to an inadequate teacher. Blanka remembers: „ She was never satisfied and would rap our knuckles all the time. She would call us ‚dumb goat' or ‚lazy cow' when we had not rehearsed enough".
No wonder then that Blanka never became an accomplished piano-player.
Thank God, there were ballet lessons as well. Although the training was hard and monotonous, Blanka loved to master her body and its movements. And when she learned to dance in harmony with the music it was like heaven!

Like so many girls of her age, Blanka was a little chatterbox. It is in this context that she recalls the most unforgettable lesson of all those early years:
"One day the professor at the school of music was visibly fed up with us and our endless chatting. He told us:' don't you know that God has allotted an exact amount of words to all human beings? If this supply is used up, we will have to die. Well, I am afraid that you will die very young if you go on chatting like this!' That was hard stuff and I had to think it over for quite a while. I could not quite believe what this man had told us, but it was impressive nonetheless".

Holidays were always carefully prepared and arranged in style. During the long summer vacation Bertha, one of the nannies and the children would be sent to Novi Vinodol, a fashionable seaside resort on the Adriatic coast, not far away from Rijeka.
They would spend three or four weeks with Zivko joining them whenever his work permitted him to do so. Blanka learned how to swim quite early, she adored the warm water, the sunny days and the late afternoons, when they went to a pavilion to enjoy the local band, have a lemonade and some sweets with it.
And in winter, they all would spend a week or so in the Alps of Slovenia, walking, watching the first skiers and take the sledge downhill. When this was not possible due to Zivko's work they would go sledging and building snowmen in the Medvenica hills close to Zagreb.
To the difference of the Kandels the Selingers were a completely a-political family.

They did not share the Zionist or socialist ideas of the Kandels nor were they interested in other ideologies. Zivko wanted to run his business well, and Bertha had many small pleasures of her own.
That does not mean, however, that they were not aware of what was happening around them. There was the radio, which Zivko listened to regularly. And there were many newspapers and magazines in the office where they were needed for obvious professional purposes. He would bring them home in the evening after he had read them.
Blanka does not recall that they had subscribed to "Zidov" or another Jewish magazine. When she was allowed to listen to the radio she liked it more for the great music than for the news.

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So much about the childhood of Rudolf and Blanka. Gradually, events around them, Zagreb and Croatia started to have an impact on their personal lives. That is why as of now I want to focus on the "objective" side of History from time to time:

1934

Germany
First concentration camps exist in Esterwegen, Dachau and Oranienburg (later on Sachsenhausen). Hitler has many of his opponents in the SA and in the armed forces killed in June and July. With the death of President von Hindenburg in August Hitler becomes the sole and undisputed leader of Germany. He sets out immediately to transform the country according to his weird ideas.

Italy
In June, Hitler arrives for his first official visit in Rome.

Yugoslavia
Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey and Romania sign the "Balkan Pact" in February. In October, King Alexander I. is killed in Marseille by Croatian extremists.

The Jewish People

A wave of forced expatriations from Germany includes amongst others Albert Einstein, Theodor Plivier and Johannes R. Becher. The writer Erich Mühsam is murdered in July.

A King is killed

Both Rudolf and Blanka remember the tragic events of Marseille. They didn't know much about Alexander I., but, after all, it was "their" king as well! The great majority of the people in Zagreb was gripped with deep emotion - with the exception of the few who sympathized with the extreme Croatian nationalists. Flags were flown at half-mast, a day of general mourning was observed and special remembrance services were being held in all the schools.
Blanka still recalls the famous last words the dying monarch reputedly had said to his escort: " May Fate protect my Yugoslavia ". That was precisely the stuff legends are made of.

Due to his business relations, the daily lecture of the newspapers and the regular listening into radio programs Zivko Selinger was well informed about what was going on in Germany. He found it worrying and disgusting. On the other hand, Germany was far away and Zivko was not particularly interested in politics.
He used to say: " That won't happen here in Yugoslavia. I simply cannot imagine that we would hand over power to a criminal. And, by the way, we have done no harm to anybody. Why should other people do harm to us?" When he said "We", he meant Yugoslavia and not the Jews. It had not yet dawned upon him that Hitler was filled with a deep and deadly hatred against everything Jewish.

This utterly naïve attitude should prevail in the Selinger family for some years to come. And even the first threatening speeches of Adolf Hitler did not change things. He was not being taken seriously yet.

The Kandel family did not react very differently. There certainly was a greater degree of political awareness due in particular to the Zionist background of Rudolf's parents and the fact that Mavro entertained international business contacts. But day-to-day life remained quiet and normal.

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The greatest event of 1934 had been Rudolf's Bar Mitzvah. It had been an absolutely joyful festivity with the whole family, many friends and as many presents. To some extent he became proud of the great history of Zagreb's Jewish community. Hadn't the first known Zagreb Jews, Mar Saul and Mar Joseph met with the Caliph of Cordoba in the tenth century already? And didn't they have one of the most beautiful synagogues around? And wasn't their Maccabi sports club the best one in town? These were thing Rudolf realized.
But he was not yet capable or prepared to link these particular phenomena to the wider fate of his people.

During the same year, Blanka moved to the secondary school for girls. This learning institution was called a "Realgymnasium" where she learned German, French and, starting in the fifth grade, some Latin. The school was located in the ancient convent of a religious order in uptown Zagreb. But some two years later it should move downtown to Klaiceva Ulica.
At this address a large building complex was to be found, containing several schools. How exciting it had been to step out of the well-defined experience of a Jewish primary school into the world of so many diverse cultures and age groups! Blanka kept her ears and her eyes wide open. She was curious by nature, and there was so much to be learned!

1936

Germany
The infamous racial laws are ruthlessly applied. The „Law to protect German blood and German honor" is Hitler's beginning of a systematic oppression of the German Jews. Other pieces of legislation transform German Jews into second-class citizens. Already a year earlier, the director of the „Office for racial policy" of the Nazi Party had declared publicly that all Jews should be „expelled" from Europe. His simple reason: „Because they are Jews".
In March, the German army occupies the de-militarized Rhineland area. Though this coup constitutes a clear breach of the Versailles and Locarno treaties, the Western powers let it happen without any serious opposition.

On the other hand, Hitler succeeds in misleading large parts of world opinion with the Berlin Olympics, an unparalleled display of German „grandeur".

Italy
Mussolini and the Fascists are still digesting the botched and cruel war against Ethiopia. This poor and innocent country had been annexed in early May.
King Vittorio Emanuele of Italy adopts the title of an „Emperor of Ethiopia". The League of Nations ends all sanctions against Italy soon afterwards.

Spain
General Franco starts a civil war against the legitimate Spanish government, dominated by the parties of the Left, which had won the previous elections. Immediately afterwards, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy lend their military support to the usurper. Spain becomes a major training-ground for World War II.

The Jewish People
David Frankfurter, a Croatian Jew, kills Wilhelm Gustloff, the Swiss Nazi leader, in Davos in February. Arnold Zweig and Thomas Mann are expatriated.
As of August, 93.000 German Jews or some 20% of the Jewish population have left the country.
During a meeting in Geneva the Jewish World Congress calls on a worldwide boycott of Nazi Germany – to no avail. The Nobel Price for Peace goes to Carl von Ossietzky, the famous German Jewish writer and thinker.

A rather serene summer

Small white clouds sailed slowly through the high skies of early autumn. It was a warm afternoon in Zrinjevac Park, but a light breeze brought fresh air and let the leaves in the old trees tremble gently.

Rudolf sat on a park bench. He had been reading "Buddenbrooks", Thomas Mann's masterpiece, which his father had brought home from a trip to Vienna. When he came to the story of Morten Schwarzkopf, son of

a pilots' commander and student in Göttingen, he got pensive and put the book away.
Here was a young man who – nearly a century ago – thought and dreamed like him! Morten wanted to abolish all privileges not based on virtue or performance and he dreamed of a world reigned by Justice and equal rights for all human beings. And that was exactly what he would try to achieve as well! Morten would have been a wonderful friend, had he lived in Zagreb in 1936 and not close to Lübeck in the 1840's.
With this thought the melancholy so typical for afternoons in late summer Nearly overwhelmed him.

But then he smiled to himself.

When he looked back, his summer had been very good, indeed. At the end of the school year the reports at the Gymnasium had shown excellent grades – even in Greek and Latin, which he did not like particularly well. Well, Rudolf had a talent for languages. His German, nurtured in the family, was almost impeccable. His Croatian was very good. And he showed good progress in French, which he had just taken up a year or so ago (English had no part yet in the canon of classical education on the Balkans).
He had spent a sunny summer vacation on the Dalmatian Coast, together with his parents and with his sister.
They had done a lot of swimming, fishing and sunbathing. Rudolf had gained his first experiences in sailing on the boat of an older boy. He liked his healthy tan and all sorts of outdoor life. The sturdy and handsome boy of sixteen had attracted admiring looks of quite a few girls, which he was equally proud of. Friends had dropped by for dinner or a quiet chat.

And in the evenings some of Kandels' many friends had dropped by for dinner or a quiet chat in the terrace of their hotel. And the Kandels had many friends, indeed. Zdenka Slovak came to visit them for a couple of days. She was a lot friendlier with Rudolf than she had been all the years before.
Well, after she had finished school, she had entered Wiener Bankverein as a young clerk – and Rudolf's father was her boss now!

Mavro Kandel enjoyed his high-ranking position with his bank, still the most powerful financial institution on the Balkans. His important responsibilities, covering Zagreb as well as the Croatian and Slovenian

regions within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, brought him into regular contact with his colleagues in the financial industry, with important businessmen all over the country and with a lot of Zagreb's top brass. And Cecilia continued masterfully to play her triple role as a mother, as the undisputed queen of their large household and as one of the centers of various social activities within the Jewish community.

Since most of the well-to-do Croats spent a part of the summer at the seaside, the Kandels would regularly meet people they knew from back home. When the family took out for their regular evening walk on the promenade, they would not go unnoticed. The ladies would set up their sweetest smiles, the men would take off their light summer hats as a sign of reverence, the boys would make a bow and the girls would curtsy. And then the consuetudinary invitations would be formulated and accepted.

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A particularly close relationship had developed with the Steiner family. Lavoslav Steiner, whose family showed a remote Alsatian origin, had started his working life as a clerk with the Wiener Bankverein. He was a few years younger than Mavro Kandel, and as a consequence the First World War had interrupted his career. Lavoslav had fought it in an Alpine battalion, he had fought it throughout its entire length and had been decorated several times.
After the war, he came back to Wiener Bankverein. He was close to become one of Mavro's substitutes, but then he decided to set up his own business in the pulp and paper trade:
Lavoslav Steiner's Veltrgovina Papirom. He did well and enjoyed to be independent. Lavoslav and his wife Elsa shared the Zionist convictions of the Kandels and discussed them quite often.
However, they took those ideas a littler more seriously than the Kandels ever did. Lavoslav bought a rather large orange grove in Palestine, somewhere between Yaffo and Haifa. "This is our piece of reinsurance," he would tell his friends.

When the Kandels and the Steiners were chatting about bygone times and their youth, Lavoslav loved to tell time and again the story of his mother. As a young woman she had lived in Budapest. She had been member of a debating club, where she met many interesting people. On of them was a journalist with the name of Max Nordau.

She got to like him a lot, and one day this young man proposed her. Her parents resolutely turned down his advances. In the end, he was only a "pen-pusher"!
Lavoslav's mother suffered a lot, but she obeyed. And then she met her husband anyhow. Had they all known that this Max Nordau would become the closest associate of Theodor Herzl and a co-founder of organized Zionism!

A nice story and a hint to the power of Jewish heritage and its traditions! Cecilia and Mavro were aware of it as well as the Steiners were. However, they were no longer dominated by it. The families had made it out of the Galician shtetls some fifty years ago. The march into the world of the emancipated, bourgeois Jewish middle class of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had begun in Vienna or Budapest and had been completed in Croatia.

In the meantime Mavro had been made president of the local B'nai B'rith organization. He commanded an increased respect and had to shoulder additional responsibilities.
For the Jews of Zagreb and beyond B'nai B'rith was an important point encounter and assistance. It counted a little less than 100 members in the Thirties. More than a third of them were doctors, lawyers or businessmen. And the position of a president would become even more important only a few years later.
Furthermore, both the Kandels and the Steiners were subscribers, albeit not very regular readers of „Zidov", the most influential Jewish paper in Yugoslavia. Since "Zidov" was produced in Zagreb, the different editors-in-chief would be regular guests in their homes.

As we already know, Rudolf did not devote his leisure time to studies of the Torah or the Talmud either. He continued to prefer Maccabi and the horse stable. And political or philosophical discussions with his fellow students were more to his liking than the study of religious texts. Uncle Ignatz, the mysterious Komintern agent about whom many stories were whispered in the family, served much more as a point of reference than teachers or rabbis.

He remembers what he had read in a book, which he discovered in his father's small library:
„ The modern Jewry is a champion of revolutionary achievements. In general, it does not accept nationality in the true sense of the word.

However, it goes hand in hand with the enlightened elements of all nations. For modern Jewry mere tolerance is not sufficient. It wants to liberate its world from all religious denominations, if possible".
Well, that was very close to his own convictions. And the fictitious Morten Schwarzkopf of "Buddenbrooks" would have subscribed to it as well, wouldn't he?

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By the way: Maccabi had provided Rudolf with the most thrilling experience of a great summer. Worldwide Maccabi games had been held in Tel Aviv. Were they a conscious anti – event against the Nazi Olympics in Berlin? Were they not? I don't know.
Anyhow, the Jewish community of Zagreb had sent a small team of gymnasts, fencers and other athletes. Rudolf had been one of its members.

What a wonderful trip it had been! They boarded a rusty steamer in Split and spent some wonderful days on the Mediterranean Sea, filled with songs and laughter. They went ashore in Haifa, the only port to speak of in Palestine and took an old bus to Tel Aviv.
Some hundred athletes had gathered in the sports grounds prepared for the event. And they were all Jewish! These were days of Jewish pride and self-esteem. It was in such a way that Maccabi would be a symbol of strength for Rudolf – a clear sign that there were other ways to lead a Jewish life than those of the cautious submissiveness of his ancestors or the somehow not too well reflected assimilation of his parents.

And of course there had been heated discussions between the "Sabras", coming from various Jewish settlements in Palestine, the ardent Zionists and those who sought assimilation of and integration into their respective „Host cultures". In the end, Rudolf had not sided with any one of them. He felt quite at ease in Zagreb. He liked the mental strength of the young settlers. But his real, his inner home was the world. It certainly was not Palestine.

For most of the time however, the young participants of the Maccabi games behaved like youngsters have always done, everywhere and at any time. They bragged, they chatted and they flirted.
The Zagreb team was no exception to the rule. They met many people and they made many friends.

Rudolf took part in the gymnastics and fencing competitions. He did not win medals for his team, but he performed well and everybody was proud of him. What else did it need to boost his confidence?

He felt that way in spite of the fact that tension in Europe was definitely growing. Back home, Rudolf had already experienced the first activities of the Ustasha, this extreme nationalistic group of people who advocated the complete independence of Croatia, cleverly exploiting the fact that the Serbs were still trying to dominate Yugoslavia in a threatening manner.

Both at home and in the small café at the Jewish community they had discussed Hitler's despicable political ideas. They had spoken about Mussolini and Franco.
And already in April, „Zidov" had carried an article which said: „The times we live in call to mind the blackest periods in the history of the Jewish people. We hereby declare that the world is turning away from the pain of the Jewish people, and that this is no longer a question of Jews alone".

When Mavro read these lines aloud during dinner, both he and Cecilia thought that the author was exaggerating. And Rudolf found the editor much too whining for his taste. Only a little later, when appeal of the Jewish World Congress to boycott the Nazis didn't have the slightest effect, did they give him some credit for his article. Anyhow, Rudolf did not really care for the time being.

The breeze had completely subsided. The small clouds had given way to a huge, black beast looming over the mountains north of the city. A thunderstorm was in the making.
Rudolf grabbed his book and headed for home. He was still smiling. Yes, it had been a good summer!

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And Blanka, just fourteen years old at that time, was completely unaware of what was going on in the world. Madrid, Berlin and even Belgrade were awfully far away for her. She liked her school very much. And quite unlike Rudolf she can't recall any sign of anti-Semitism or other forms of discrimination against her or her family.

She adored the afternoons spent at the Maccabi precincts and the gymnastics lessons there. And when the young “heroes” came back from the Tel Aviv Maccabiad she was amongst those who cheered wildly.

There was nothing to be afraid of. Not yet.

(Final Status before linguistic control: February,2002)

The corporative system is being subordinated to the principle of totalitarianism. The State and the ruling party are institutionally linked, as had been the case in Germany since 1933.

Decisive weeks for Mavro

For Rudolf and the whole family the summer of 1938 had been much different from all previous ones.

Nothing had changed on the surface.
In spring everybody had congratulated him for his baccalaureate at the Gymnasium, which had come „magna cum laude“ and with excellent grades. Rudolf was glad that his school days were over. Like so many others he had simply outgrown the rigid structures and the dull rites of a traditional learning institution.
And his excellent results gave him sufficient reasons to look forward to his university years very positively.

But first there where two weeks of relaxation in August to enjoy. And enjoying it had been!
The blue and warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea had been as enticing as always. Sailing, fishing and swimming produced the usual fun and excitement.
Rudolf had definitely grown into a good-looking young man. And the mothers of the equally good-looking girls on the beach in front of their hotel close to Split had thought: What a promising match! That is why they had kept their eyes shut when Rudolf took their daughters out for a stroll or a visit to the cinemas and cafés in town. There were no longer professional matchmakers around, at least not for Zagreb's Jewish élite, but mothers are born matchmakers anyhow.
And Rudolf promised to be a good match. He was handsome, intelligent and apparently ambitious. Furthermore – wasn't he the son of „Herr Direktor“ Kandel, the reputed banker?

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But it was exactly here that the troubles began.

Mavro Kandel had lost his job with the Wiener Bankverein in early summer, only six weeks or so after Rudolf's baccalaureate.
Austria was part of the "Third Reich" by now. And its rulers in Berlin and in Vienna did not want Jews to remain in representative positions anywhere, let alone in banks.
A direct order, emanating from the Nazi party's local headquarters, had been given to Wiener Bankverein. The Executive Directors in Vienna had been at a loss. Mavro Kandel was their best manager in the Balkans and they liked him a lot personally. On the other hand they had to obey orders if they wanted to pursue their own careers. After an intense discussion they had come out with a compromise solution.

One evening in early June, three men were sitting in the dining room of Zagreb's leading hotel: two of the bank's top executives from Vienna and Mavro.
The two men had not given him any prior notice of their visit. They just had called and asked him to be at the hotel at half past twelve. He was not to tell anybody about this encounter. Mavro was mildly surprised to say the least. We hadn't they called him earlier? And why hadn't they shown up at his office?
He smelled trouble. And he knew that his colleagues would not have acted in such a way without an important reason. He showed up at the hotel without any sign of protest and was escorted right away to a discrete corner table in the restaurant.

When the orders had been taken and the headwaiter had disappeared, the two men from Vienna came to the heart of the matter right away.

„Listen, Mavro," they had said after what his father has told Rudolf later on," we have known each other for many years. And you know that we hold you in the highest esteem. But now we are in big trouble together. And that is why we did not show up at the bank."
Mavro sat silently, disguising his mounting unrest. He waited for them to continue. The elder one of his colleagues cleared his throat and whispered in a low voice:
"As you well know, things in Austria have changed completely. The ‚Ostmark', as we are called now, has to dance to the tune of Herr Hitler. And this man does not allow for any generosity or even carelessness if it comes to Jews. His helpers in Vienna have explicitly asked us to relieve you of your functions right away.

Believe me - we have discussed your case in the Executive Board very thoroughly. We think we have reached an acceptable compromise…"

The banker stopped. The waiters had arrived with the wine, the water and the first courses. A welcome interruption, because it gave Mavro some time to recover from his initial shock. To be fired – absolutely unimaginable!
He regained his composure and asked in an equally low voice: "And what kind of 'compromise' do you have in mind?"

The other banker continued:
"Well, we have reached a unanimous board decision. We will not dismiss you formally. But you will have to accept an anticipated retreat. This will allow you to use the title of a 'retired director' – as long as circumstances allow us to tolerate it."
He lifted both hands in a gesture meant to calm down his vis-à-vis.
"This arrangement will allow you to touch half of your most recent salary for the time being. There will be some severance payment as well, and you may retain your apartment in our building. We will nominate your successor here in Zagreb within a couple of days. This man will come from our Klagenfurt branch. We have instructed him already to handle this matter with utter discretion. I sincerely hope that you understand the quandary we are in, don't you?"

Mavro stared into space. He understood only too well. He was both furious and utterly disappointed. What a terrible perspective after all he had done for "his" bank! To be a pensioner at the age of 49! And the successor had already been nominated! What would he tell his wife, his children and his friends?
But he was angry with himself as well. How could he live under the illusion that after Hitler's takeover in Austria everything would continue like before? Times had changed, definitely and irrevocably.

Mavro decided to play it by the rules - politely, respectably and business-like. He folded his table-napkin, got up and said in a sober voice: „ The best, I think, is to offer my resignation. The treatment you offer me is absolutely improper!"
When he started to leave, the two Viennese executives held him back. They implored him to consider their proposal carefully. What about his financial future? What about his family and his children in particular?

And then their colleague and friend from Zagreb began to give in.
“Give me some time to reflect,” he said, “ and to talk things over with my wife.”
The bankers knew that they had won and could afford to be somewhat generous. “Of course, Mavro, do just that,” they hastened to add. “Please come to see us here at the hotel. We will be waiting for your final decision. If possible, make it before eight in the evening. We will have to catch our night train back to Vienna.”
„And don’t forget,“ one of them said getting up from the table, „ it is us in Vienna who take immediate risks in this matter, not you!“ There was no threat or viciousness in his voice – just a quiet and resigned sadness.

Mavro got up as well and strode out of the room. But then he rushed home.
Since both Sophia and Rudolf happened to be present, he immediately gathered everybody for a family meeting in the living room. When he had finished his report, a deep and saddening silence reigned around the table.
During the last weeks they had talked a lot about Hitler’s explosive mixture of terror at home and aggressive assertiveness abroad. And now something had happened which they had believed totally unthinkable! The long arm of the Nazis reached directly into their personal lives!

It was Cecilia who spoke first.
„ What is happening to you, Mavro,“ she said slowly and in a voice, which was filled with composure and resolve, “ is disgraceful and extremely unfair. And this so-called compromise is very difficult to digest. We all know that you have done no wrong – on the contrary!”
When Rudolf watched his mother, he saw her trembling slightly for the first time in his life.
“But what can we do?” she added. “Our old Vienna is a Nazi town by now. We all are well aware of how the Jews are harassed and maltreated there. You have helped the first Austrian refugees yourself, so you know.”

“And remember the stories about the poor Jewish people who have been forced to clean the pavement with their toothbrushes,” Sophia interjected somewhat cheekily.
“That is particularly awful, but let me finish, please,” Cecilia reprimanded her daughter. She addressed her husband again.

“You should accept the proposal. We can live with a lower salary, the severance payment and our savings.
All those who really count for us will know that you have done nothing, which could be regarded as dishonest. We can and we will arrange ourselves and help to prepare the future of Sophia and Rudolf. God knows what this future will bear for us,“ she sighed.

This was about the longest speech Cecilia had ever given at home. An extensive debate followed. It was a heated one.
Sophia completely agreed with her mother. She shared her arguments and, furthermore, she had a specific reason as well.
Only two months earlier, in April, she had married Walter Eisner, the son and junior partner of a wealthy Jewish gentleman who traded in luxury watches and had many international connections. No, she saw her future in Zagreb where she wanted to build a real family and to lead a happy life there. This sparkling prospect overshadowed the harsh realities. Yes, she had her illusions. But which young woman in love doesn’t?

Rudolf, on the contrary, was of a radically different opinion. It was not so much that he was scared about his future. He still had no clear ideas about it anyhow.

Earlier this year he had blatantly refused the proposal of his father who wanted him to study Law and to become a legal expert. When he declared that he wanted to be active in the field of forestry instead, Mavro had replied: „ That is an absolutely surprising proposal for me. But - very well, you may give it a try! I insist however that you gain some practical experience first“.
Wiener Bankverein owned sizeable properties in the rural areas of the Balkans. Among them were two large forest estates in Slavonia, and Mavro happened to know the people over there. Immediately after the baccalaureate Rudolf was sent to one of these estates for three weeks. He started a course in forest ranging. When he came home he was appalled. Those properties were ruthlessly, even ruinously exploited by the tenant and by the owner (a fact which Mavro knew nothing about), and corruption had been the guiding principle of their management (which Mavro knew something about, since he had had to throw out the previous tenant). That was the end of his forest-ranger dreams.
In the end, he had decided to enroll in the medical faculty of Zagreb University. But he was not yet convinced of that choice, either. Let us wait and see, he told himself.

No, Rudolf was enraged because his principles of equity and justice were found to be openly violated once again. During his last year in high school he had become a more outspoken international socialist under the spell of some progressive teachers and a group of likeminded Jewish friends.
These convictions had led to bitter debates with his father. Rudolf admired Mavro's balanced personality. But he despised his professional activities, which he regarded as „utterly capitalistic". A somewhat frustrated Mavro had accused him of "shortsighted idealism without any inside into reality".

And now that! Well, rage alone is not a convincing argument. And when he tried to convince the others that father should stick to a formal resignation, Cecilia repeated all her counterarguments and Sophia added a very important one as well: " Isn't it a lot better for Papa's dignity and self-esteem if he can maintain a link with the bank, even if it is a severed one?"

In the end, the whole family rallied to Cecilia's position.
Mavro went back to the hotel were his visitors waited for him. A contract was signed and the former colleagues shook hands in the end. When Mavro went back to the bank in order to lock some documents for the day he could not help thinking that the gesture of the people in Vienna had been quite humane and generous – given the circumstances.

However, this event had made him lose many illusions. They had been shown a display of brutal efficiency under the polished surface of gentlemanlike behavior. He had become aware of the fact that worse things could happen to him and his family. They had to prepare for it!
Mavro went back to his office the next day. When he had assembled his staff, he simply informed them of his decision to go into an early retreat, for "reasons of health", as he added. The astonishment was general. But some of his colleagues may have guessed the true causes of this sudden decision. Yet, they kept their suspicions for themselves.
Mavro gathered his personal belongings and never came back to the bank building again.

A week later, he went to see the new colleague who had arrived in Zagreb and was bound to take over from him.

Mavro made it a point of honor to meet this man on neutral ground – reason for another luncheon in the hotel restaurant. He handed him out a few very confidential dossiers, which he had kept for himself.

He asked his successor to have his severance payment paid out in gold coins. The banker showed no surprise at this request. He came from Klagenfurt in Austria, and he had witnessed the fate of many Jews up there. It took a few days to get those coins. A courier brought them over from the vaults of the bank. Mavro signed a receipt, took the coins and gave this small treasure to his wife. “Keep that close to yourself, Cilly”, he said. “ And keep it handy! Who knows when and were we will need it”.

Rudolf begins to stand on his own feet

“Look, Rudolf, who has written to us!”

Cecilia ran up to him, as soon as he had opened the door of the apartment. He felt wet through and tired after two hours of intensive fencing.
“But let me have a shower first!” he asked his mother laughingly. “No, no, you have to read it first,” she replied quite impatiently. Rudolf sighed, obeyed, sat down and started to read. The letter had been sent by uncle Ignatz.

Ignatz Kandel had become an enigma for the whole family.
They knew of his involvement with Komintern, since Mavro had talked about it in a mixture of open disdain and hidden admiration. They knew that, since he spoke more than half a dozen languages, was very charming and a good speaker, he had been sent out to several countries.
Though his main task was of a more theoretical nature he was sent abroad quite often to indoctrinate the “comrades” in all those regions. Due to the antagonist views and the revolutionary aspirations of the Communists he had to act as an undercover agent. That suited him extremely well. Ignatz had always been a secretive guy, as his brother remembered.
He almost never got in contact with his family and he had not written for more than two years now. The only thing they knew for sure was that he had met and married Beate, a German communist from Leipzig.

The letter had been posted in Paris. In it, Ignatz explained that he had been to Morocco, Turkey, China and Mongolia. “Just like the great explorers,” Rudolf thought appreciatively.
A couple of months ago he had come back to Moscow, only to find out that circumstances had changed dramatically in the meantime. Apparently he was quite disillusioned with his organization. His idealism had vanished almost completely and Stalin’s bloody purges had left a deep mark. It was with deep frustration that he mentioned the inhumane methods of the Stalinists.

He had asked his masters to be sent to Paris, since he wanted to meet some undercover contacts from the French colonies in Northern Africa. The Komintern people, not yet suspicious of him, had let him go. He had arrived in France via Sweden and had the clear intention to stay there for a while.
He ended his letter regretting that - due to security reasons – he was not able to travel to Zagreb. He left his Paris address, just in case…..

“What a unique fate!” Rudolf remarked while handing the letter back to his mother. “Yes, sure,” she said. “But why did he have to chose such a perilous life?” She was quite unaware of the glare in the eyes of her son.

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While under the shower Rudolf started to think. The letter had left him thrilled.
It was a real pity that uncle Ignatz was unable to make it to Yugoslavia. He felt a deep urge to meet him and to ask him a thousand questions. There had to be a man behind the enigma!
Long discussions with Ignatz, that promised to be something infinitely more interesting than the basics of medical science. It may have been a more naive than idealistic view, but Rudolf was certain that he would find answers to the many unanswered questions of his existence in Paris. He would not get those answers from his father, practically minded as he was, let alone from his mother.

No, it was a real pity indeed! But then an idea struck his mind: Why not go to Paris, why not meet Ignatz there? At least, his uncle had left his address. The idea came and went, because there was a big, big question: How would he ever make it?

His parents never would let him go. And since he was not an adult yet, he could not make such a far-reaching decision by himself. But then a strike of luck occurred, which was hard to believe.

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The Belgian consul carefully dipped the ash of his cigar into the ashtray, which had been placed next to his leather armchair. He had enjoyed his dinner with the Kandels, followed by a glass of old Port and a good cigar in Mavro's library.
He was a portly man in his early Sixties, with a red and cheerful face, topped by curly and gray hair, which he stroke repeatedly with a pair of broad and fleshy hands. When he had done his thinking, he suggested in his curious French marked by a heavy Flemish accent:
„ Why don't you send your son to Antwerp to study maritime law? This is the very first institute of its kind worldwide. Furthermore, maritime law will become very important over the next decades. He can have fun and earn a lot of money with it.
I happen to know the director of the institute quite well. He will accept Rudolf, I am quite sure. By the way, with all those refugees, more than 40.000 Jews are living in Antwerp nowadays. He should find friends easily."
Mavro smiled. This seemed to be a very reasonable proposal, indeed! At it was close to his deep wish to see Rudolf study the Law.

During the previous months, Mavro Kandel had intensified his activities as a president of B'nai B'rith. Too many Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria needed assistance. Many of them wanted passports in order to immigrate to other European countries, to the USA or to Latin America. Thank God, there was quite a group of consuls in Zagreb, and a few of them were ready to help.
Mavro had made friends with the Belgian consul in particular. In former times he already had entertained regular contacts with him, since the bank had some Belgian shareholders.
He had asked the consul's advice on Rudolf's studies. The Belgian had accepted readily, because the restlessness of the young man had not gone unnoticed with him. He came for dinner and made his proposal.

Mavro smiled, and Rudolf, after having taken a deep breath, smiled as well. He did not have the slightest idea what maritime law was all about. But here was the chance to stick the nose out and to exchange the

rather boring backwaters of Yugoslavia with the exciting life in Western Europe!
He was eighteen years old already and had not seen any foreign country.

Although this was not unusual in a time when mass-transport and mass-tourism did not exist yet, he had longed to see foreign shores for quite a while. And then – Antwerp was very close to Paris, which would bring him into contact with Uncle Ignatz. Finally!
He asked some polite questions to hide his excitement and accepted the consul's proposal.

The Belgian cabled the director of the institute in Antwerp, and a few days later Rudolf got his admission. The necessary travel documents were provided. Mavro dug into his savings and provided his son with a sizeable amount of hard currency for his time abroad. The suitcases were packed, and on a beautiful September morning Rudolf boarded the train to Lubljana and Graz. There were thorough controls at the border to "Greater Germany", but the passport and customs people remained quiet and polite, when Rudolf showed them the letter with which the Belgian consul recommended him to the institute director in far away Antwerp. He had a good connection to Vienna, where he boarded a night train for Amsterdam.

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In the middle of the night Rudolf was rudely awakened when the train came to a shrieking halt at a station in the middle of nowhere. A dozen police officers came aboard and started a thorough search, compartment by compartment.
Rudolf was afraid, of course. And he noticed that his companion for the night, a man in his sixties, was worried as well. They had no specific reasons for their fear, but the whole atmosphere was disquieting. When two or three of the policemen opened the door to their compartment, both men stared at them with their eyes wide open. To their great relief the Germans looked at them only very briefly. One of the officers shook his head, and then they closed the door again.
Rudolf, who occupied the lower bed, pushed the blinds a bit upward trying to observe what was going on. After a while he saw a group of policemen escorting a very tall man with dark hair across the platform.

Some cars were waiting next to the small station building. The train started again.

It was difficult to find sleep afterwards, but Rudolf managed somehow. When he had woken up, washed and dressed, he went to the restaurant car for an early breakfast. On his way back he asked the railway serviceman at his car about what had happened during the night. The man said in a voice, which barely hid his disdain:
"They caught a Jew who was trying to flee from Germany. He must have been a writer or a Communist or something else". Rudolf was not sure if the disdain of the serviceman was directed at the police officers or at their victim. But he didn't dare to inquire.

What nobody at home knew – Rudolf had changed ideas in the meantime. He did not have the slightest intention to stay in Antwerp. Paris had become his true goal – and he would go there as soon as possible! And during the long hours on the night train he decided to go to France right away. He had to change trains in Cologne again, and when it had crossed the German border at Aix-la-Chapelle his decision was made. He got off in Liège, and two hours later he was on his way to Paris.

In the meantime the director of the institute had sent his daughter from Antwerp to Brussels main station in order to pick Rudolf up there. She waited in vain and returned to Antwerp, quite puzzled. And the director sent a cable to Zagreb in order to ask for Rudolf's whereabouts.

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Rudolf arrived in Paris, Gare du Nord, in the early afternoon.
The first thing he did was to go to the next post and telegraph office. He sent a cable to his parents. It simply said: " I am in Paris. Don't worry, please! I will write you a letter with all the details".
He remembers: „ The ensuing discord with my family was horrible. My father was absolutely mad with. For quite a time he refused to talk to me. Well, I have to admit that I had treated him in a disgraceful way. He had financed my trip and put all his confidence in me. And he had made a fool out of his friend who after all was a representative of the Belgian Crown".
Once again the daredevil in Rudolf had won the upper hand against his inborn cautiousness.

Paris was the first really big city he had ever been to. No wonder then that he was absolutely overwhelmed! The private teacher who had given him French lessons back in Zagreb had told him a lot about the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, Montmartre, the Seine, the museums, the streets filled with lights and people. He had shown him some books and photographs, and they had gone to the cinema to watch a French movie from time to time.
But what is a tale compared to reality! Rudolf was totally dazzled when he left the train station and watched the life on the esplanade.
But before he allowed himself to be drowned in the marvels of Paris, there were some practical things to do.

He went back into the station, entered the post office again and looked into the big telephone book for a nice place to stay. He took some notes, changed a note into coins and started dialing. Luckily he found a suitable address quite quickly: A small and inexpensive boarding house, boastfully called Hotel Saint Pierre. It was located Rue du Col de Médecin in the twelfth arrondissement. His mansard room was tiny, the bed was old and creaking, the toilet was located at the end of the floor. But he couldn't care less, and the small window offered a view over the roofs of the adjoining buildings. That's like Paris in the movies! he thought happily.

His next days were entirely spent in the streets of the French capital. He got up very early, had a coffee and a brioche at a nearby café and started to explore one quarter of the city after another. He walked for hours on end, interrupted only by a baguette and a glass of red wine or apple cider for luncheon. He took the dark green busses with their open platforms or the Métro – just for the thrill of it.
And when he came home in the evening – dead tired – his landlady liked to have him for dinner, together with the other guests of her boarding house. During the First World War her husband had been killed at Verdun, the scene of the most senseless and bloody fighting mankind had seen until then. His framed photography on the wall of the living room showed him as a proud soldier with a grim face and an enormous moustache.
She disliked the „boches" as she used to call the Germans. She liked Daladier, the moderate new Prime Minister of France, but mainly because she had despised of his left-wing predecessors from the Front Populaire.

She was an excellent cook and liked to drink a good glass of red wine - or two. All in all she was a typical „ bourgeoise parisienne“.

Some days later Rudolf took the next practical step. He went to the reception center of the Sorbonne. This famous mother of all French academic institutions was awe-inspiring for someone who had only known Zagreb University with its small community of around 500 students. And – there was the question of his linguistic capabilities. He spoke some French, all right, but would it be good enough to be accepted as a student?

To his great astonishment and relief he was accepted. He was allowed to matriculate in several less popular courses such as journalism, physics and geology. This was not exactly his preferred choice, but it was a lot better than nothing. And he was a student in Paris!

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When he had received the relevant documents and had visited his first courses, he took the courage to write a long letter to his parents. He tried his best to justify his decision and asked them to forgive him and not to worry.
This letter was by far not enough to appease his still irate father. But his mother slowly became proud of her son. She didn't have the courage to mention it to her husband, but she liked to tell her Jewish friends about her boy who had „made it to Paris“ and was successfully starting an academic career over there.

Only then did Rudolf dare to visit his uncle. He approached the house Ignatz was bound to live in with some apprehension. Would he find him there? Fortunately enough Ignatz still lived at the same address he had sent to Zagreb.
Ignatz had known Rudolf only as a little boy. And Rudolf had not the slightest recollection of his uncle. And here they met again, two Jewish men stranded in Paris! When Ignatz opened the door of his small apartment, Rudolf saw a man a lot taller than his father, with a taut, lean face and eyes, which were burning in their deep sockets. He looked older than he was, and it were not only his slightly sagging shoulders or his receding hair, which were contributing to this impression.

As it happens under such exceptional circumstances the two men opened their hearts quite readily – already during their first encounter. Rudolf spoke to Ignatz as he never had spoken to his parents or to anybody else. He talked about his dreams and aspirations, about his apprehensions and anxieties.
He learned quickly that his uncle was a profoundly unhappy man. In his fantasy he had him imagined as a blend of a hero and a master spy. What he found was completely different. Ignatz had definitely broken with Stalin and his inhuman policies. He had witnessed the numerous „cleansings" in Moscow where many of his best friends had lost their lives. And his personal convictions, a mixture of humanism and socialist ideals, had been destroyed when he discovered the deep anti-Semitic tendencies with the Soviet rulers.

"We have given them Marx, Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky. And these criminals in Moscow treat the Jews not better than the Nazis do," he said with deep bitterness.

Shortly after his arrival in Paris he had let Komintern know that he had no intention to come back into the Soviet Union. The apparatchiks in headquarters had put him on their „traitors' list" immediately. He learned about it only indirectly when his wife Beate, who was still a true believer, asked for divorce.
By the way: in spite of her initiative Beate should fall victim to Stalin's executioners shortly afterwards. In spite of all her affirmations to the contrary she was suspected to be a secret follower of Leo Trotsky, the "renegade Number One". That suspicion was enough to kill her.

Ignatz had no possibility to communicate with his remaining friends. He knew that he would bring great danger upon them. Much later he learned that this assumption was absolutely correct. Once, he had sent a small parcel with coffee and cigarettes. The addressee had to undergo several painful interrogations because of this contact with „Kandel, the traitor".

Though his initial expectations were not met, Rudolf was deeply impressed by his uncle. Here was a man, who had fought a great fight for his entire life – even if it turned out to have been a wrong and a futile one! In spite of his frustrating experience Ignatz was neither desperate nor resigned. He would concede that he his fight had been wrong and futile. But "the cause" itself still remained good and noble. And he would take up the fight again as soon as circumstances would allow it!

The two men discussed their Jewish existence only at the end of their first encounter. Rudolf was probing into his own identity, as all his zigzagging during the last months had shown quite clearly. And this identity already was a rather complicated one: a Jewish boy without real religious attachment, brought up in the Austro-German culture, with a Yugoslav passport, living in Paris.
Ignatz smiled when the matter came up. „Look at me," he said. „ I am a man of many identities. And believe me, most of us are. We are not just Jews, Christians or Atheists. We are not just French or Yugoslav, workers or bourgeois. Our only real identity is that of a complicated, multi-faceted human being, and our only real challenge is to fill this identity with dignity, love and compassion. That is what real socialism is all about".

Rudolf was not satisfied with such an explanation. " What you tell me, uncle Ignatz, may be true and worthwhile in theory," he retorted. "But look at the facts of life! Men are not made to be saints, and many of them are outright criminals. Look at what happens in Germany or in the Soviet Union! And tomorrow it may happen elsewhere..." "You are right," Ignatz answered, " but should this deter us from fighting?" "No," Rudolf conceded grudgingly, "but my own fight will be a personal one. I want it to be built on principles, but not on an ideology. I want to pursue a career, help others in a practical way and set an example, if possible".
In the end, Ignatz and Rudolf agreed to disagree for the time being. And they met quite regularly from now on, once or twice a week.

One evening, after they had finished their frugal dinner, Ignatz passed to the attack quite unexpectedly.
„ My dear Rudolf," he remarked in a sharp voice, „ I have listened to all your dreams about developing your personality and improving the fate of others in your way. Do you really want me to take all that seriously? How can you sincerely hope to do good to others if you don't start with your own family? You have cheated your father, you are sitting here in Paris enjoying life, and within a couple of months you will have to ask your family for financial assistance!"
He stopped talking and looked at Rudolf to see how he was taking it. Rudolf had been taken off guard. He sat there in deep silence and then he said: "Let me think things over, Ignatz. You really might have a point here."

When he had returned to his mansard he stayed awake for a long time. What he didn't want to tell his uncle right away: Ignatz had been absolutely right! He had given it some thoughts himself, but he had shied away from the consequences until now.
Since he couldn't sleep anyhow he sat down at his old table and wrote another long letter. In it he asked his father for forgiveness and understanding again. Would get an answer this time? With this thought he finally fell asleep.

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And he took another decision.
The next day he started to look for a part-time job, which would be compatible with his studies. Well, they were not too strenuous anyhow. He browsed through the vacancies in the newspapers and was lucky again.

A private clinic, proudly called "École Francaise de Phisiothérapie et de Massage" offered the position of an assistant in physiotherapy and massage. He presented himself right away at the indicated address, Rue Cujas 21 in the fifth arrondissement away, mentioned his initial studies of medicine in Zagreb and was accepted. As it turned out, he was an absolutely talented apprentice. Monsieur Dolto, a medical doctor who ran the clinic, was very satisfied with him.
After a couple of weeks, Rudolf was given his first clients who came to the clinic for treatment. He started to make some money on his own. Furthermore, a quasi-academic certificate was waiting down the road.

Rudolf had begun to stand on his own feet.

Blanka enjoys being a teenager

When you are a girl of fourteen your life is filled by much else but curiosity, fun and first, romantic love. Why should it have been different for Blanka?
There was not much to worry about. Mum was there to help in delicate situations. And Daddy would protect her if everything else failed. Everybody around her agreed: Blanka was such a likeable, charming, beautiful girl! She was rather small but well proportioned.

She featured long brownish hair and gray laughing eyes with green specks. She was assertive without being arrogant, witty without being obnoxious.
Well, Blanka may have been a little spoiled on the sides, but who really cared? She didn't, anyhow. She would not even know what it meant to be spoiled.

For the first time she had gone to this year's summer vacation without her parents. Some Zagreb secondary schools had invited their students to a big summer camp on one of the gorgeous islands off the Dalmatian coast.
The camp consisted of huge tents and two barracks which housed a kitchen, a dining hall, a small medical center and the sanitary facilities. And though the tents were separated between boys and girls, there were sufficient opportunities for an innocent flirt, which might result in a little, furtive handholding with one of the many charming boys.
That was nice, but the swimming, the laughing and the songs around the campfire were a lot nicer.

When she returned to Zagreb, a short period of dullness and melancholy followed. School seemed to be rather dumb and she had the feeling that her parents no longer really understood her. It just had been too wonderful at the camp!
Thank God there was Mario Sternberg, the good-looking and charming son of a very rich Jewish industrialist. After school hours Mario would invite her for a tasty ice cream or a handful of freshly roasted chestnuts. His father was one of the very few people in Zagreb to own a car. How great she felt when she was invited by the Sternbergs to take a ride around town!
But the best, of course, was to tell her classmates about her "adventures", assorted by a little embellishment. And when they could no longer disguise their envy, Blanka liked it as well. Yet, she was wise enough to avoid situations where hidden envy could have led to open antagonism.

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At home, day-to-day life ran its quiet course.
Brother Otto, nine years old now, loved to spend his time with grandma Anica. She was suffering from a weak heart condition and was glad to have the boy around for company, not only at the traditional "jour fixe".

And when Blanka picked him up, there was always time for the famous "real" coffee with milk, a hot chocolate, a cookie – and grandma's tales!

Anica was a great storyteller. She spoke German, whereas with the Selingers Croatian had developed into the preferred language. Nevertheless, Blanka and above all Otto liked the tales of the great Jewish judges and kings, of Samuel and Saul, of David and Salomon. Otto indulged in the stories of Samson and of the Maccabeans. Blanka's idol undoubtedly was the Queen of Saba, her legendary beauty and her equally legendary court. She admired Judith and Esther although she didn't feel really close to their heroic behavior.

Of all the dramatic events unfolding in Europe Blanka remembers only the short reign of Chancellor Schuschnigg in neighboring Austria and the "Anschluss" in early March. The whole family had been impressed by the unbelievable enthusiasm in Vienna and elsewhere, which accompanied the annexation. That evening, her father was more than subdued. " If Hitler can swallow Austria so easily," he said, " he will swallow other countries as well. And which one will be the next?"

Later on, they heard and read about the massive outbreak of a vitriolic anti-Semitism and the first examples of brutal violence over there. But they didn't discuss it. They kept their fears for themselves and suppressed them as best as they could.

During the next weeks the telephone at Victor Selinger & Sons did not stop ringing. The profound changes in Austria affected many companies, most of them Viennese, which did business in Yugoslavia. New companies were founded, owners and managers changed. In all these cases commercial and financial information of a confidential nature was needed, and Selinger & Sons were there to provide such a type of information.
Business boomed, but Zivko was anything but happy. He learned quickly that the Austrian Jews were eliminated from all economic activities overnight. He shivered at the thought that similar things could happen elsewhere, eventually even in Zagreb. He shivered, but he remained silent, because he did not want to worry his family. Anyhow, there was no immediate threat yet.

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When the opera and theater seasons started in autumn, Blanka was invited by her parents to join them in some of the performances. She fell for classical music immediately.
She remembers Vienna operettas, "Aida" and a Shakespeare piece. Most of all she recalls a concert with three truly great musicians: Lovro Matacic conducted the local symphony orchestra, the unforgettable soprano Zinka Kunz-Milanov performed some songs of Richard Strauß and the outstanding Enrico Mainardi played the cello. Zagreb was an interesting cultural center, indeed!

Well, you need a nice dress for a theater season, even if you are only fourteen years old. And Blanka got it. Her aunt Zenka owned a fashionable dressmaking atelier on Jelacic Square in uptown Zagreb. Up to ten tailor's cutters were working there. Zenka would go to the great fashion shows in Paris, would visit the salons of people like Dior, Balmain or Fath. And then she would buy the proper fabrics, accessories and dress patterns to bring them home.
You wouldn't have to wait for very long to see the ladies of Zagreb's High Society parading around in the latest Paris fashion!
Zenka loved Blanka very much. No wonder then, that she personally tailored Blanka's first elegant dress.

It was during these autumn months that some of her classmates started to take some distances from her. Some girls stopped inviting her at their homes. And on the playground she overheard a conversation in which she was called a "Jewish bitch".
Blanka did not react, let alone fight back. She tried her best not to care too much. Weren't these girls just envious of her? Anyhow, they were pretty narrow-minded. Blanka didn't give it any further thought; she didn't mention these developments at home, either.

1939

Germany
In March, German troops occupy the Moravian town of Ostrava after a vicious press campaign against Czechoslovakia. The strong man of Slovakia, the catholic prelate Tiso, declares the independence of that country. Only two days later Czech President Hacha is forced to sign an „Agreement concerning the protection of the Czech people by the

German Reich" in Berlin. Within hours the German army marches into Prague. The Czech army has to stay in the barracks. 35.000 German and Austrian refugees in Prague and other towns find themselves in great danger.
During the following week Chamberlain announces the end of the „policies of appeasement". The USA, Great Britain and France withdraw their ambassadors from Berlin. The Polish government is put under enormous German pressure concerning various territorial and legal issues. When Poland refuses to give in, the „Reich" stops all negotiations.
In April, Hitler denounces the German-Polish non-aggression-pact and the German-British agreement on their respective fleets.
In August, Germany and the Soviet Union conclude a pact of non-aggression and a secret protocol, which leaves Eastern Poland, Finland and the Baltic states in the grip of the Soviet rulers.
On September 1, Germany raids Poland. This is the beginning of World War II.

Italy
Pope Pius XI. dies in February. He had been a stout opponent of all modern totalitarian tendencies.
Eugenio Pacelli, who had served as nuncio in both Munich and Berlin, is elected. He adopts the name Pius XII.
In April, Italy raids Albania and tries to consolidate her earlier conquests. Albania is annexed to the „Fascist Empire". Italy becomes an even more important neighbor of Yugoslavia.
In May Mussolini and Hitler sign the so-called „Pact of Steel". This is the real birth of the „Axis".

Yugoslavia
Reigning Prince Pavel and his government try to develop a balancing act between Berlin, Paris and London. In the end, however, economic and infrastructure constraints become decisive. These constraints, which push the country closer to Germany, are made abundantly clear to Pavel during his 5-days state visit in Berlin.

The Jewish people
The gradual marginalisation and humiliation of Jews in Germany, former Austria and the occupied areas is pursued with brutal energy.
In January, all „political" Jewish organizations in Germany are dissolved.
In March, all Jews are excluded from the armed forces.

In October, the first Jews from Austria and Czechoslovakia are deported to Poland. The Polish Jews living in the countryside are systematically deported to cities; the first Ghettos are created.
In April, the first 102 refugees try to find shelter in Cuba. However, at that time Cuba and all other Central American countries refuse to accept Jewish immigrants. Their ship, the „Flanders", has to return to France. In May, the „Saint Louis" leaves Hamburg harbor with some 1.000 Jewish passengers. Again, all doors in Central America remain closed. The ship has to go to Antwerp.

It's not the good old Europe anymore!

Our memory likes to play tricks on us. At least, it works in a selective way. There are some events, which have happened in a remote past. They stay with us forever, in all detail. And then there are whole periods of our lives, which have almost disappeared in our recollection. Sometimes we simply don't remember, even if we try to. Sometimes we don't want to remember, even if asked. We suppress what might be painful for us.

Rudolf's memory works like everybody else's. There are only a few singled-out events he remembers when talking about the first months of 1939.

There was New Year's Eve when he went to mingle with the crowds on Champs Élysées. The mood was festive, even hilarious. The Parisians exuded an unbelievable self-confidence. The economic situation had improved; the all but finished Maginot line protected the French homeland on the Eastern border. The sea routes to the colonies around the world were open. And hadn't Prime Minister Daladier signed the peace agreements in Munich? All in all it promised to be good year, filled with great movies and exciting chansons.

The newspapers had carried articles dealing with the increasingly untenable situation of the Jews in Germany and former Austria. Refugees and emigrés had told their tales. Their impact on intellectuals in France was considerable. But, frankly, the man in the street did not care too much. C'est la vie – and after all: Such atrocities would never happen here!

And when the brilliant fireworks were ignited from the top of the Arc de Triomphe, when an enormous Tricolor flag glowed in the lights of this gorgeous display, when a million of people sang the „Marseillaise“, Rudolf was infected by all this enthusiasm, joyfulness and pride. He felt at ease, and he felt secure.

There was early spring, when Zdenka Steiner fell out of the blue. She had finished high school in Zagreb that year and had come to Paris to study languages. Rudolf was proud to show her “his” Paris, and when she needed a job to earn some money on the side, he arranged for one with a colleague of Monsieur Daultau. Both of them studied and worked very hard; but there was time for an inexpensive dinner or a visit to one of the cinemas from time to time.

There was May 1, Labor Day in Europe. The trade unions and the parties of the Left had called for a powerful show of force. And powerful it had been, helped by an unusually warm and sunny day. Hundreds of thousands of workers, clerks, civil servants and students gathered around the pompous monument on Place Denfer-Rochereau, ready to trundle down the Boulevard St. Michel, cross the Seine river and gather in the Jardin des Tuileries to listen to their leaders.
Rudolf had been invited by some fellow students to join the event. He accepted and gathered his first direct experience with organized masses of people.

When all the hands started to clap rhythmically, when slogans were shouted in deafening unison, he felt daze and a growing uneasiness. Well, he liked what was being shouted in the streets of Paris. „Social justice“, „Power to the working classes“, „ Fight against fascism“, – he couldn’t agree more.

However, this big human beast, thousands of legs, hands, marching bodies and wide-open mouths simply made him sick physically.
He had to leave the procession, go to a nearby bistro, ask for then men’s’ room and vomit. Afterwards he sat on a chair on the sidewalk, had a bottle of mineral water and watched the unending défilé.
He would stay clear from mass happenings for the rest of his life.

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Spring and summer had been full of threatening events in Central Europe and in the Mediterranean.
All previous optimism had gone. It had made way to a general mood of apprehensive moroseness and a threatening, foreboding quiet. The Europeans seemed to hold their breath in front of some deep and frightful darkness. War had become a distinct possibility.

This was to be perceived clearly during France's national holiday on the 14th of July.
It was celebrated on the same Champs Élysées, but the athmosphere was completely different from the one reigning at New Year's Eve. Rudolf had invited Zdenka to see the parade. And Zdenka brought with her another Zdenka, Zdenka Slovak. He remembered her well. She had been one of his sister's close friends in Zagreb, one of those who had constantly tried to shove him around when he was a little boy.
But these were different times. Zdenka Slovak was very friendly – and she had an interesting story to tell while they were waiting for the parade to begin.

Zdenka Slovak had been working at Wiener Bankverein when, in January 1939, the British Council offered the possibility to acquire the so-called "Cambridge Certificate" in English language. With such a document you were entitled to teach the language in normal primara and secondary schools.
Since she had a natural gift for languages, Zdenka enrolled at this course. She brilliantly passed the exams, which were held at the British Consulate, and got a 3 months' grant for a stay in Great Britain. She asked for an unpaid leave from her bank, which was refused. She was told :"If you go abroad you will have to give up your job. But when you will come back – with all those additional qualifications – we will be happy to hire you again." Zdenka quit (as it turned out later on, all the Jewish employees of Wiener Bankverein were fired, even before the war started).
She decided to have a stopover in Paris on her way to London.

And then the parade began. The French Armed Forces staged an enormous display: tanks, infantery, canons of all sorts and kinds, airplanes flying over the cheering crowds in the streets, military bands. But nevertheless : there might have been the typically Gallic defiant resolve, but there was no self-confident enthusiasm.

Rudolf thought that he had detected some anxiousness in the crowds, which was overcome only in the evening, when the fireworks swept away all doubts.
Zdenka Slovak left the next morning. She took the train for London. And when Rudolf and Zdenka Steiner had waved her good-bye and were heading for work, both thought : “Well – she will be a lot safer over there.”

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As far as Rudolf was concerned, these months were overshadowed by an important personal development. Back home in Zagreb, his father had fallen ill.

The loss of his position with the bank, the grievance with his son’s ways of handling his life, the growing stress under which he suffered as a leading representative of the local Jewry – all that had weakened his heart to a dangerous extent. The doctors strongly recommended that he take the waters in a good spa.
When Mavro discussed the matter with his wife, Cecilia had an idea right away. „Why don’t you go to Vichy in France?“ she suggested. „ It is a fine health resort, the doctors over there are famous - and it is not too far away from Paris“. Mavro did not understand immediately. „ What has Paris got to do with it, Cilly?“ he asked.
„ Well, you could meet Rudolf and bring him home,“ she answered in a quiet voice. “I miss him very much and we could need him here if the situation deteriorates.”

Mavro was adamant. He had no intention to meet his son in Paris. But Cecilia was as tenacious as ever. She did not give up. In the end a compromise was reached: Mavro would meet Rudolf in Vichy.
Cecilia sat down during that same night and wrote a letter. Rudolf isn’t in possession of it any more. And he did not want to tell any detail. However, we might guess what was written in it.

Rudolf would have preferred to meet his father in Paris. At least, he could have shown him his academic and his professional achievements. They could have met Docteur Daultau and they could have been together with uncle Ignatz.

After all, the two brothers had not seen each other for quite a while. However, he knew that he had to give in. He wrote back to Zagreb and a meeting was set up when his father would have arrived in France.

Rudolf took the train to Clermont-Ferrand and left it in Vichy.
When he arrived at Mavro's hotel he had to wait a little. His father was in the middle of a treatment. But then he arrived in the hall.
Rudolf greeted him politely and begged his pardon once more. Mavro, visibly moved, took him in his arms, the two men cried and then they talked, talked, talked. A broken pot was cemented for good.

Rudolf spent only one night in the hotel. He went back to Paris the following morning. They had agreed that Rudolf would stay there until the end of his father's cure. Mavro would pick him up then and would take him back to Zagreb.

When that day arrived the two men went to see Ignatz for another emotional meeting.
Mavro implored Ignatz to accompany them to Zagreb. „ Listen," he said, „ you know as well as I do that war is in the air. This madman Hitler will not give in at anything. You might no longer be safe here in France. And anyhow, in such dangerous times a Jewish family should stick together. We might need each others' help quite soon".
Ignatz motioned away quietly. He fully agreed with Mavro's analysis of the situation. But he made it quite clear that his place was with his comrades-in-spirit. He would not give up fighting for a „human socialism" just because of an unpredictable criminal. However, he promised to let them know about his whereabouts and to write more often than in the past. They embraced and kissed good-bye. They did not know if and when they would ever meet again.

Well, even Ignatz could not reckon with the fact that, only a few days later, Hitler and Stalin would conclude a non-aggression pact.
Did he regard this somber document as a confirmation of all his fears concerning Stalinist tactics and strategies? Was he desperate and utterly frustrated as most communists outside the Soviet Union were at that time? We do not know for sure. Ignatz never spoke or wrote about this subject, neither then nor later on in his life.

Rudolf and his father went to see Docteur Dolto the following morning.

He explained his situation. The doctor was sad to see him leave. “Your son has been of great value to my work,” he explained to Mavro. “I think that he could become a very good doctor one day.”
Mavro was duly impressed and Rudolf looked at him with some pride. He got his salary and an serious-looking certificate. Later on, this piece of paper should help him in a very valuable way.

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Father and son took the night train to Marseilles. In late August of 1939 it had become impossible for them to travel through Germany. Over there life had become too risky for a Jew, even if he was of Yugoslav nationality.
After a strenuous trip via Southern France, Genoa, Milan, Venice and Trieste they finally reached Zagreb. Rudolf was home again. And it is easy to imagine that his mother was the happiest person on earth!

The general mood in Croatia had changed remarkably, as Rudolf found out. There was a widespread clerical anti-Semitism to be found.
It was not yet of an aggressive nature. But Rudolf learned quickly that it had to be seen in conjunction with the propaganda efforts of the Germans. Modeled on the infamous gutter magazine „Stürmer“, Nazi-financed pamphlets , calling quite openly for the „ eradication of the Jewish cancer“, were distributed everywhere.
No wonder then that he found his mother and his sister nervous and frightened.
This mood became even stronger when Germany invaded Poland only a few days later. A real war had started!
Quickly, the first news of wild atrocities committed against Poland’s Jews reached Zagreb. They spread horror in the Jewish community and in the Kandel family as well.

What to do?
That was the question dominating every discussion in those days, and it was almost impossible to find a satisfactory answer to it. A general feeling of apprehension and helplessness befell many of their friends.
„Zidov“, the Jewish newspaper, was of no help, either.
In a commentary, published on September 8 (probably for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year), the reputed editor Ze’ev Glück put this general feeling in the following way:

„ At present it is impossible to assess properly the situation we find ourselves in; we cannot imagine the scope of the disaster we are witnessing. The events are still taking place, the stone has started rolling and no one knows when it will stop. Trembling with fear we turn our eyes from the tragic present to the unknown future".

Rudolf despised such an attitude of motionless passivity. And he was comforted by the fact that his father shared his views. They would not simply sit and wait. They would try their best to act and to help
And – there still were some points of comfort, albeit not of optimism.

Zagreb's Jewish community was a large one. Due to the influx of refugees and of Sephardic Jews from the Adriatic coast, it counted more than 11.000 members by now.
In former times, there had been tensions between the old and relatively wealthy Ashkenazi families who had been in town for some decades already, and the poorer newcomers. The „cultural clash" between the progressive, liberal families and the strictly observant Jews, just emigrated from the rural areas of Eastern Europe, had been very important.
But now, facing a common menace, the Jews of Zagreb pulled together. A great number of cultural, social and educational associations saw the light of the day, some of them clearly Zionist in attitude and aspiration, others not.

And then there were the refugees from Germany and former Austria. Most of them were in transit.
They wanted to reach safer shores in Palestine, Latin America, the United States or member states of the British Commonwealth.
Mavro was fully involved in attempts to help these refugees. As president of the local B'nai B'rith he continued to have contacts with the consulates of neutral countries in town. At least some of them were prepared to issue the documents necessary for a safe travel.

And even for the non-Jewish population of Zagreb, the Jewish community still played an important, if not vital role. It comprised influential merchants, first-class lawyers and above all many medical doctors and dentists.
Professor Gottlieb for example, a very respected figure in the community, was at the helm of the best chirurgical clinic not only in Zagreb but also in the whole of Yugoslavia.

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One evening, the Kandels had a famous guest for dinner. It was Manès Sperber, the great psychologist and writer. As it turned out during the evening, he had been born in 1905 in a small Galician town very close to the one Mavro's father had come from.
As a scholar of the great professor Adler he had been a highly reputed teacher of individual psychology in Berlin from 1927 to 1934. He had emigrated to Austria and then to Yugoslavia.
Sperber gave a brilliant analysis of the psychological foundations of both Nazism and the prevailing Jewish attitude in the face of it. His conclusions had been rather dire. The Nazis wouldn't play it by any normal rules. Since psychologically they regarded themselves as the „master race" they felt completely free to make and to break rules, which were completely theirs.
He was more than doubtful if European Jewry would be able to develop a common and coherent strategy against this enormous menace.

Rudolf lay awake throughout most of the night. Should he join the ranks of the Zionists and actively look for a possibility to make it to Palestine? That would be an option. But what would become of his family? He would have to leave them behind, and many of his friends with it.

In the end he developed his own survival strategy: live by the day, put all senses on alert, stick to his people and help as best as he could.
And if the oppressors did not follow any rules, why should he? If it should become necessary, he would bend them. The situation was not that serious yet, however. First things first! And as a consequence he tried to organize the more practical aspects of his life.

He enrolled again at the faculty of medicine at Zagreb University and resumed his studies. Docteur Daultau's certificate helped him to find a job with an institute of physical therapy.
Very soon afterwards, Rudolf decided to continue this therapy work on his own. The 19-years-old got the necessary papers to work as an independent masseur and physiotherapist. Since he was very good in this profession, he constituted a stable group of clients relatively quickly.

It was not the good old Europe anymore. But an apparently normal life still was possible in Zagreb. This should change only a little later on.

(Final Status before linguistic control: February,2002)

IN THE EYE OF THE HURRICANE – A BRIEF INTERMEZZO

1940

Germany

In March, SS-Leader Heinrich Himmler orders the establishment of the Auschwitz concentration camp, not far away from Cracow and other major centers of Jewish life in Poland. This establishment takes place on June 14. Rudolf Hoeß is the first commander. Later on, when the necessary "infrastructure" had been completed, the Auschwitz compound should be transformed into the largest center of human extermination mankind has ever seen.

In April, German troops invade Denmark and Norway. This assault foreshadows the big war in Western Europe.

In May, systematic euthanasia becomes an official part of the Nazi „health system". The German armies start the invasion of Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and France. The French defense is broken surprisingly soon, since France lags behind considerably in both tactics and military technology.

In June already, Paris is taken by German troops. Hitler has a big victory parade organized on the Champs Élysées. The „Vichy government" is installed under Maréchal Pétain. This puppet régime is dependent on Berlin; yet, it retains a formal autonomy over a sizeable part of the national territory.

In August, the Royal Air Force attacks Berlin twice.

In November, German bombs destroy Coventry Cathedral.

Italy

In March, Mussolini proclaims his readiness to join Germany's war efforts „in the foreseeable future". Furthermore he declares his intention to severe all political and diplomatic ties with Great Britain and France.

In June, the „Duce" declares war to both countries.

In August, the Royal Air Force attacks Milan and Turin. This is the beginning of a systematic bombing directed at all major industrial centers in the country. There is no Italian air defense system to speak of.
In October, Italian troops start their attacks on Greece. The latter reacts with a counter-offensive.

Palestine
In February, Malcolm Macdonald, British Minister for Colonial Affairs, announces that – in spite of the growing and cruel hardships of the Jews in large parts of continental Europe - the immigration quota for Jewish immigrants will not be raised for the time being.
The Italian Air Force attacks Haifa without inflicting major damage to the city and the harbor.
In November, more than 2.000 illegal Jewish immigrants are barred from entry on board of two ships off Haifa port. Some days later, the immigrants produce an explosion on one of these ships, the „Patria", in order to prevent her forced return. Some 1.800 immigrants die.

Yugoslavia/Croatia
No major development. The country lives in a deceptive normalcy.

Most of the Jews in Zagreb lived as if they were in the eye of a hurricane. Parts of Europe went up in flames, Jews were persecuted and killed in several countries, but everything was quiet in Croatia. Well, almost everything.

The Ustasha became more insolent by the day, but the central government in Belgrade succeeded quite well in keeping up law and order. War was raging next door, yet psychologically Poland, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Denmark and Norway seemed awfully far away. The steady flow of Jewish refugees had become a trickle, and the knowledge of German brutality in occupied Poland had spread. This created some unrest within the Jewish community, but the almost limitless capacity of self-deception still prevailed.

What would happen on the Balkans? It was known that Mussolini had set his eye on parts of the Dalmatian coast, especially on those areas, which had been under Venetian control until the end of the eighteenth century. Venice had never had much in common with the rest of Italy – yet

nobody cared in the circles of the nationalist and imperialists Fascists in Rome.
However, most of the people in Yugoslavia doubted that Mussolini would dare to attack their country.
This was not tiny Albania! And when the courageous Greeks turned the Italian attack into a disaster, the Yugoslavs lost almost all their fear. The preposterous "Duce" became a laughing stock in the cafés and bars from Split to Belgrade, from Zagreb to Dubrovnik.
And why should the Germans attack in the region? The relations between Belgrade and Berlin were good. And backwaters generally tend to be safe and quiet.

But not all the Jews thought that way. There were some families who anticipated the worst and left the country in time. The great majority stayed, however: in Zagreb, in Osijek, in Belgrade, in Sarajevo and elsewhere. Cultural life inside the Zagreb Jewish community flourished; the contacts with the other communities remained intact both on an individual and a collective level.

After sixty years it is very difficult to say if this "normalcy" was a real one; part of it certainly was just made up. Very probably most of the Jews felt an imminent danger by now. Most of them had become more conscious of their identity since Hitler had opened the eyes of many assimilated Jews over the last years. This madman did not differentiate at all! All the Jews were his targets, not just some specific and under-privileged groups.
Yet - especially if you feel apprehension and an ill-defined fear you need some normalcy to survive. We all put up a brave face while encountering exceptional circumstances!

And what was true for the Jewish community in town was true for the Kandels and the Selingers as well. The discussions at home became more frequent and more agitated, but wasn't life quite bearable? Where was the immediate danger?
After all, Mavro Kandel could live on his pension. And all the men he knew still drew their hats when they met him in the streets. Furthermore, he was active in developing the internal coherence of the Jewish community and in helping a few refugees.
After all, Zivko Selinger's business developed quite well, even if he had lost some "Aryan" clients. And for both wives life did not change at all. As a sign of precaution, however, both men had transformed a large part of

their savings into foreign currency and into gold coins. Their inborn cautiousness asked for some form of reinsurance. And they entertained all their international contacts to a maximum. Who knew when they would become really important?

After all Victor Selinger, Blanka's uncle, climbed the career ladder at the Zagreb subsidiary of the Schenker Company, the haulage and logistics business in which was doing quite well. He intensified his dealings in Italy and helped to build the company's center in neutral Switzerland.

Sophia Kandel was living a normal family life with her husband, Walter Eisner. In the meantime he had been awarded the exclusive distribution rights for the famous Marvin brand of watches, covering the whole of Yugoslavia. That didn't make them rich; but it was a solid basis for the foreseeable future.

Well, we all are wiser with the benefit of hindsight. However: Who would have thought of escape in such circumstances?

Lavoslav Steiner, Mavro Kandel's close friend and Zdenka's father, was one of those who prepared emigration. He had developed extensive business relations with the United States and Great Britain, via the various activities of his pulp and paper company. He had deposited sizeable amounts of money with banks in New York and London. He even had procured the whole family and himself with immigration certificates to the United States of America.
But in the end even the Steiner's did not go. It was the fear "to have to start all over again" that held them back. And this fear was an understandable motive to continue with the process of self-deception. Furthermore, their daughter Zdenka had met Fritz Brichta, a very promising young lawyer. After a formal engagement in May they married in September. She puts it this way: " The world was burning but we did not move until the flames reached our homes".

Rudolf's friends at the University and with the Maccabi sports club still dreamed their Zionist dreams. Some of them really wanted to move to Palestine. But how would one make it there?
The British administration had all but closed the borders. That much they knew from the office of the Jewish community. And "Zidov" informed them about the dire fate of the refugees aboard the "Patria". There was another obstacle as well: The Fascists had enacted a whole series of

anti-Semitic laws in Italy. Boarding a ship there had become a very complicated endeavor. They knew about the very flexible way Italians used to enforce their laws, but the risk was considerable nonetheless.

It seemed to Rudolf that the University was the best place to live for the time being. After his initial hesitations, he had developed a strong liking of medicine. And his period with Docteur Daultau played a major role in this development. He wanted to become a medical doctor and he wanted to become one as quickly as possible.
The stable group of customers he served as a masseur and physiotherapist helped him to earn some money. For the rest of his days and his nights he studied, interrupted only by a short week of summer vacations – on the Adriatic coast as usual.

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Blanka simply continued to enjoy life. As a somewhat pampered teenager of sixteen she didn't care too much about what was happening around her. And with her inborn optimism she laughed away problems if they got too serious. Her parents envied her for this happy disposition; but it gave them confidence as well. Her daughter would get along very well – even under difficult circumstances!
There still was Mario Sternberg who adored Blanka. Mario had slowly grown into a very good-looking young man. Some years later people would have called him a "Latin lover" – with his dark skin, his dark black hair and his overwhelming smile. Blanka liked being with him, being invited to his parents' white villa in the hills overlooking Zagreb, driving around in the family car.
Blanka loved to be seen with such an attractive male. She was flattered, but she didn't love him.

In early spring she had started to take dance lessons in a private dance school in downtown Zagreb. She had convinced Mario to be her partner, which left some other girls very envious, indeed. He had a natural talent for dance, and so had she. Both young people liked their bodies to follow the rhythms of a foxtrot or a waltz. They liked to move together and to touch each other. But physical attraction never went beyond an innocent kiss when he brought her home.
When the day of the concluding ball came nearer, aunt Zenka became a very important person, more important than Mario.

Zenka's dressmaking atelier continued to do well. Mirko, her husband, was working with her as a general manager and aunt Böshka was helping out, too.
The two women did their best to tailor Blanka's ball wardrobe – a "dream in cream colored tulle" as she recalls. And the festive environment of the great Music Hall added to the splendor of the event.
When the young dancers entered the ballroom in a festive procession, Blanka and Mario were the most beautiful couple – that was the general consent. Blanka had seen to it that the skirt of her dress was wide and light. She had nice legs and was generous with them while dancing.
And her father was very proud when his daughter asked him for a dance later on in the evening.

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The romance between Mario and Blanka came to an end a few weeks later. Mr. Sternberg had sold his business in Zagreb. The whole family left town, aunts, uncles and cousins included. They immigrated to the United States of America where Mr. Sternberg had considerable business interests on which he was able to start a new and successful company.
Mario finished high school over there. He had barely started his college years, when he was drafted into the US naval infantry in 1943. After a period of rigorous and intense training his unit was transferred to Great Britain. This unit should be a part of the army going to France in June 1944.

The Sternbergs were proud of their beloved son. And they were very happy that he was called to a most honorable duty – to be one of the valiant soldiers who eventually would liberate Europe from the yoke of Nazi tyranny.
D-day arrived, and Mario landed with one of the first units on the beaches of Normandy. He was killed in combat a few days later, only 20 years old.

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However, let us get back to 1940. The Kandels, the Selingers and so many others were living in the eye of a hurricane. Such a life does not last for very long as we all know.

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A WHOLE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

1941(until Hitler's assault on the Soviet Union)

Germany

In January, Germany and the USSR sign a far-reaching agreement of economic cooperation. It will never be put in practice.
In March, Bulgaria signs a pact with Germany and Italy in Berlin and joins the „axis powers". The German forces, led by General Rommel, start a counter-offensive against the advancing British army in Northern Africa.
In April, Hitler fixes the date for the invasion of the Soviet Union in a secret order: June 22.The families of the Soviet Trade Mission had left Berlin two weeks earlier.
In May, Hitler's "deputy" Rudolf Hess flies to England to start secret negotiations on his own account. He is arrested.

Italy

In January, British troops start an offensive against the Italian occupation forces in Eritrea and Ethiopia. In the same month, Allied troops conquer Tobruk and take 14.000 Italian prisoners. Hitler forces Mussolini to coordinate his military moves with the overall German strategy.
In February, the 10th Italian army surrenders to British forces in the Cyrenaica; some days later Italian Somalia capitulates as well. In the course of the following months, the Italian troops in Africa are completely defeated.
In the battle of Cape Matapan the Royal Navy destroys the Italian fleet in the Mediterranean Sea to a large extent.

Yugoslavia

In March the government under Prime Minister Dragisa Cvetkovic, acting under enormous pressure from Berlin, joins the alliance of the „axis powers". Two days later, this government is toppled. Prince Regent Pavel goes into exile. Young Prince Peter is proclaimed King. Air Force General Dusan Simovic is made Head of Government.

As a consequence Hitler gives orders to prepare a „lightning campaign“ against Yugoslavia.
On April 5, Yugoslavia signs a „ Friendship Treaty“ with the Soviet Union.
On April 6, German troops invade the country. The Yugoslav army capitulates on April 17. King and Head of Government go into a London exile as well.
In October, communist and royalist partisan units, who count some 80.000 fighters by now, start their first sizeable activities. Beginning of German reprisals.

Croatia
On April 10, Ante Pavelic, the leader of the ultra-rightist Ustasha, proclaims the fascist State of Croatia.
On April 22, the Italian Foreign Minister Ciano and his German colleague Ribbentrop sign a confidential agreement. The northeastern part of Croatia is placed under the control of the German army, the southwestern part under the control of the Italian army.
Montenegro, most of the Dalmatian Coast, a large part of the Istria peninsula and of Slovenia are placed under complete Italian control in May, after a visit of Ante Pavelic to Mussolini. On the other hand, Bosnia-Herzegovina is made part of Croatia. The puppet-state joins the „axis powers“ in June.
An anti-Jewish legislation, modeled on the „examples“ of Germany, Slovakia and occupied Poland is put into force in April.
The deportations and killings of Jews and other minorities start in May. The first concentration camps are being erected near Jadovno in the Velebit Mountains, close to the Adriatic coast, and on Pag Island.

The Jewish People
Bulgaria publishes a set of anti-Jewish laws in January. In the Netherlands all Jews have to register with the occupation authorities.
In February, the first „Jewish Council“ (Jodenraad) is formed in Amsterdam; 400 Amsterdam Jews are deported to the Buchenwald and Mauthausen concentration camps. Some 10.000 Viennese Jews are arrested and deported to Poland.
In May, the anti-Jewish „Nuremberg Laws“ are applied in occupied France. Even earlier nearly 4.000 Jews had been arrested.
The German chemical trust „IG Farben“ decides to build large production facilities close to Auschwitz.

In March, Heinrich Himmler visits Auschwitz; he orders the construction of the Birkenau extermination camp. The Chelmno extermination camp is erected in December.

Weeks of anguish, threat and terror…..

For the Kandels and the Selingers the situation changed completely during the spring months of 1941, as it did for all the Jews in Yugoslavia. As of February and March, the radio news had been packed with propaganda from all sides. And the newspapers reported constant German pressure on and repeated threats to Yugoslavia's authorities. Berlin urged Belgrade to become a devote friend of the "Reich", and the underlying message was clear enough: You will be either our ally or our enemy!

Things accelerated rapidly during the dramatic last days of March, when the events followed hot on the heels of each other.
A week or so later Blanka's usually well-informed uncle Egon, during a family dinner, recounted them roughly in the following way:
„ Well, the background of last week's events has been somewhat more complicated than has been told to us by the media. I have been given some details by very trustworthy contacts.
We all have witnessed that Prime Minister Dragisa Cvetkovic had been under enormous pressure from the Germans. They asked Yugoslavia to join the „axis". And you all know that our economic dependence on Germany, especially on former Austria, is quite big. The "Reich" and Italy account for more than a half of our foreign trade; our roads and railways lead to Milan and Vienna. The banks and insurance companies from these countries hold dominant positions in our country.

Yet, Prime Minister Cvetkovic resisted in the beginning. He preferred to continue his balanced set of foreign policies. Finally, Hitler invited Prince Regent Pavel to the Berghof, his „Eagle's Nest" high up in the Bavarian Alps. The "Führer" presented him with an ultimatum.
Upon his return to Belgrade Pavel called the Yugoslav leadership to a secret meeting.

He explained the situation and confronted them with his choice: Let us give in to the Germans. There is nothing else we can do!
Then he asked for a vote. The Croats, led by Vice Prime Minister Macek, and the Slovenes, led by Pater Kulovec, were in favor of such an alliance with the Nazis. Their underlying argument was a simple one: They wanted to protect their regions from Italian claims. However, almost all the Serbs were against it. When the Crown Council voted on March 20, there were 10 votes in favor of the alliance, including Pavel. 5 members voted against and 3 abstained.
It was only then that Svetkovic traveled to Vienna and signed".

„ Well," Egon sighed, „ you know the rest of the story. When the Prime Minister came back to the capital, the Serbian parts of the country were in a state of revolt. The delegation was arrested on the spot. Pavel was forced into exile and General Simovic took over. And now we are on the verge of an armed conflict with Germany and Italy, which we can only lose".

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When the rupture with Germany became definitive, the Yugoslav authorities had to prepare for war. The active forces were mobilized and all the reserve units were called to the arms as well.
Blanka's father was drafted into the army during the last days of March or the first days of April. Zivko Selinger was to serve as an officer on reserve duty. This must have been a rather ceremonial affair since the Zagreb army headquarters had even sent a polite soldier who helped packing the luggage and polished Zivko's old boots to a glossy shine!
Only a day later Blanka's uncle Mirko, aunt Zenka's husband, was drafted as well. He went on active duty, as did Fritz Brichta, Zdenka Steiner's husband, and Walter Eisner.

There was no patriotic enthusiasm around. No, it was with deep distress that both the Kandels and the Selingers reacted to these developments. They assumed with absolute certainty that the Yugoslav army stood no chance against the mighty military machine of Nazi Germany and her Italian allies.
And this assumption was absolutely correct, of course.

Yugoslavia had to capitulate after only two weeks of fighting. Blanka's father fell into German hands. He was made a prisoner of war.

The Germans sent him to a special PoW-camp in Lower Saxony, close to the city of Osnabrueck. This camp was reserved for officers. Fortunately enough it was run by the "Wehrmacht" exclusively. This means that the SS-empire or the Gestapo had no say in its running. Mirko was made prisoner of war as well. Even more fortunately his unit was disarmed in a region, which came under Italian control. He was confined in an Italian camp.
As it looked at that time Walter Eisner and Fritz Brichta were the luckiest ones. In the absolute chaos following the capitulation of the Yugoslav army many soldiers fled. So did Walter and Fritz. They simply changed their military uniforms for civilian clothes and returned to Zagreb and to their young wives.

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From now on, the old and familiar world of the Zagreb Jews should be wiped off in a matter of weeks. Tragic events unfolded with an unbelievable, breath-taking speed. There were no points of comparison, there was no moment of reflection, there was not one day of respite. A proud tradition of many decades was undone in a whiff of time.
As Zdenka has formulated it:
"We recognized all of a sudden that we were no longer masters of our own time, let alone of our own destinies. From now on all the dates and events were directed by others. To react was all that was left to us. We lived in a state of complete uncertainty".
And that was exactly what the Nazis and the Ustasha wanted, of course. Such an uncertainty weakens the defense instincts.

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The German army entered Zagreb on the 10th of April.
It came as no surprise that the Croats - at least in their great majority – greeted the soldiers as if they were long-desired guests. Serbian domination during the last twenty years and the ensuing anti-Serbian propaganda campaign had born their dire fruits. Suppressed nationalist tendencies burst to the open. The Germans would help them to create an independent Croatia! And that was what most of the Croatians in the streets wanted, even if it meant an arrangement with Ante Pavelic and his Ustasha.

German soldiers were covered with flowers, Croatian and Nazi flags fluttered from many windows (nobody knew where they had come from over night), jubilant crowds gathered in the streets to express their gratitude to the “liberators”.

The tanks had come first, infantry in battle gear next. They were watched with awe. But when the German commanders were assured that they would meet no resistance, they brought in the military bands. The Croats with their rich tradition of brass music liked that particularly well.

And the Jews hid in their homes and kept the window-shutters well closed. The mezuzahs were taken off apartment doors. Instinctively and taught by recent events elsewhere the members of the Jewish community were gripped by real fear for the first time in their lives.

There was no contingency planning, but many Jews knew what had to be done next. During the night the Kandels and the Steiners were busy burning and destroying “compromising” books. The youngsters protested vehemently and watched such a horrible procedure with tears in their eyes. Why destroy things they all held in such a high esteem? What kind of harm could a book do?
But it had to be done! What if the occupiers would find “Communist” or “Zionist” literature?
And Bertha Selinger searched all the drawers for compromising documents her husband might have left before he went to the army. In the early morning hours she did what many Jewish women in Zagreb may have done during that night: Sew gold coins into different garments and keep all the valuables handy. They had to be prepared for a sudden escape.
When they were speaking at all, they did so in subdued voices. Well-known tales came into everybody’s mind, told by the elders – the tales about the pogroms, which had taken place in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the century. That had happened barely forty years ago! And they all lay awake through the rest of the night. An unspeakable fear was not created by a future, which would be a lot more difficult than the past. It was created by the fact that this future was completely unknown.

On the following morning a Gestapo official with the name of Blum showed up at the office of the Jewish community.
With cold courtesy and a thin smile he presented himself. And then he started to question the two only employees who had been courageous

enough to show up for work. He asked many questions, but what he was most interested in were connections between the local Jewish institutions and Jewish organizations abroad.
The bewildered employees answered as best as they could. They could not help but remember that the Nazis had talked for years about an "international Jewish conspiracy ", which for them seemed to be the root of all the evil in the world.
Apparently they really meant it!

Herr Blum was not satisfied with the information given to him. With barely suppressed anger he took a piece of paper out of his briefcase. "This is the complete 1939 membership list of your B'nai B'rith," he hissed between his teeth. "Our German consul in town has procured this list two years ago and sent it to our Headquarters in Berlin. Here, have a good look at it!"
And then he wanted to know, which of the members were still active in the organization and who still lived in town. "You better don't lie to me. We have ways to find out, you know!" he added with a threatening voice.
The Jewish employees shuddered, but they were unable to present him with a complete answer. They simply did not know enough. B'nai B'rith was not an official part of the community. Herr Blum set up his thin smile again and said:" You will have ways to procure the information I need. I will be back tomorrow. And then I want a complete answer!"
With that he left, but the menacing message was clear.
That same evening all B'nai B'rith members were warned. Among them were Mavro Kandel, the president of the local organization, and Lavoslav Steiner.

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Ante Pavelic and the Ustasha had officially taken over in Croatia on the same day the Germans entered Zagreb. The ill-famed Ustasha „movement" had developed into a loose paramilitary organization quite early, with training camps in Fascist Italy and Admiral Horthy's Hungary. And now, the new local rulers were prepared and ready to set up a bloody military dictatorship right away.
After seizing power Pavelic put into action a very simple program. He did it swiftly and brutally. This program was aiming at the radical ethnic cleansing of the country, the creation of a purely Croatian "Lebensraum". And as a consequence Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and other "unwelcome" minorities should be persecuted with an unbelievable cruelty.

Had they only watched and listened more carefully, the Kandels and the Selingers, the Steiners and the Slovaks would have noticed the deadly nature of the Ustasha machine very early. Why hadn't they taken the xenophobic and anti-Semitic propaganda of the last years more seriously? Why had they shrugged it off as products of an insane fantasy? Now, these criminals were turning Croatia into one great slaughterhouse.

A "Protection of the People and the State" act was passed very quickly, still in April.
Anyone who was considered to be damaging the "honor of the Croatian people" stood accused of grave treason and was liable to capital punishment. The definition of what that "honor" was lay exclusively in the hands of the tyrants and their helpers.
Shortly afterwards the first "traitors", two Leftist Serbs, were executed after a summary and non-public trial. Their names were pasted on the walls of Zagreb. Their belongings were "confiscated".
And soon it became known that these victims had been tortured in the cruelest manner before their execution. The Ustasha did not deny these rumors. They wanted to create a climate of fear and terror.

At the end of April some well known Jewish personalities from Zagreb and other Croatian cities were brought to Graz, the capital of Carinthia in former Austria . Well, they returned after some questioning by the Gestapo, but an additional element of insecurity had been created. The Germans indicated quite clearly that, behind the visible cruelty of the Ustasha, it was them who were the real masters of Croatia.
At the same time (on the 27th of April to be precise) all Jewish lawyers in town, some forty of them, were arrested and brought to neighboring Kerestinac, where a provisional "camp" had been set up. They returned gradually until June 7. Some of them had been maltreated already.
On June 22, however, they would be arrested again. After a while they would be deported to the newly established concentration camp of Jasenovac, where almost all of them were tortured and killed.

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When the doorbell was ringing again and again at Blanka's apartment, her mother, hidden behind the blinds, peered through the window. Bertha turned around and her face was absolutely pale.

"There are German soldiers down there," she whispered to her children. "Quickly, hide under your beds!" Blanka and Otto obeyed without any objection. They had seen the blank fear in their mother's eyes.
Only then did Bertha open the door with the electric buzzer, which had been installed last year. Two soldiers came up the stairs.

Two her great astonishment, they greeted her politely and inquired in German:" Is this Mr. Selinger's apartment?" When Bertha nodded silently, one of them said: "This address has been given to us by the local administration. Your apartment is big and comfortable enough to house a guest." "What does this mean, gentlemen?" Bertha asked - in German as well. "As of this evening a Major of the German Army will arrive at your place. You will host him and offer him a nice room."

"By the way, Mrs. Selinger, your German is excellent," intervened the other one. "Congratulations! This will facilitate your communication with Herr Major."
Bertha was at a loss. Apparently, these people didn't know that they were in a Jewish household. But – could she tell them? Better not! She decided to play their game and answered with as much gentleness as she was able to muster :
"Thank you very much, Sir. I have been brought up with the language of Goethe and Schiller. And I will do my best to be a good hostess."

The two soldiers saluted and rumbled down the staircase. As it turned out, the German army confiscated rooms, apartments and houses for their officers all over town. Bertha removed all signs pointing to a Jewish family: the Hannukah chandelier on Zivko's writing table, photos and etchings with Hebrew inscriptions and the Seder accessories on the cupboard in the dining room.
"Herr Major" arrived in the early evening. He was a "very cultivated and polite man, some 40 years old," as Blanka recalls. He was offered the study since it contained a big sleeping couch, and he accepted. When Blanka came to greet him, Bertha was gripped by horror. She was wearing a silver necklace with an ostentatious Star of David dangling down the middle. The German officer looked at it briefly. His face remained impassive, and he didn't make any remark.

Bertha was sure : This officer knew perfectly well with whom he shared the apartment. Yet, he behaved in a quite unobtrusive way, withdrew in his study during the evenings and read a lot.

A week later he formally asked Bertha if he could invite her daughter to the opera.
Blanka's mother was widely reputed to be a resolute woman. But now she was afraid and couldn't make up her mind. She did not dare to refuse. Potentially, the consequences could have been disastrous. She lost her courage for once and said: "Ask my daughter, please".
Since Blanka was not courageous enough to say "No", either, she accepted the invitation. They went to the opera to see Verdi's "La Traviata".
"I was trembling," she recalls. "If anybody there had recognized me! A German officer with a Jewish girl! Thank God, everything went well; I saw to it that we occupied our seats in the last moment and did not go to the lobby during the intermission."

Another week or so later the German officer left the apartment. He told the Selingers that his unit was being transferred. Upon leaving he said with a melancholic tone in his voice :" You know that War is always terrible. And don't forget: I have a family at home myself. They are very scared, and I am scared as well. I know that you are part of a Jewish family."
Bertha, Blanka and Otto gasped.
But "Herr Major" put his hands up in an appeasing gesture. "Don't worry, please. I have no bad feelings against the Jews. I am from Cologne and have had some Jewish friends at school. Nice people they were, all of them. The only thing I can add: Take care, all of you!"
They shook hands, the officer drew his cap, took his luggage and went downstairs, where a military vehicle was waiting for him. Blanka regrets very much that she can't recall his name. After the war, she would have loved to write him.

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In early May the Ustasha régime introduced the first pieces of racial legislation. It deprived the Jews of almost all of their civil rights. Many of them were expropriated quasi over night. „Commissars", lacking any qualification, were sent to control the confiscated property, barely disguising the dire fact that a simple act of robbery had taken place.

The Jews of Zagreb had to turn in their radios, which duly found their place in the confiscated homes of the Ustasha officials. All Jewish publications were forbidden, which put an end to "Zidov" as well.

The Jews had become second-class citizens at best, and they shared this fate with the Serbs, the Gypsies and other minorities. What was the worst: The discretionary and erratic decisions of the new rulers were without any appeal.

A little later the first compulsory “collection” of money and jewellery was organized. Some more were to follow. Prominent Jewish citizens were taken hostage to guarantee the success of an exploitation, which recalls the darkest periods of the Middle Ages. Mavro’s friend Lavoslav Steiner was involved in such a “collection” by which the enormous sum of 100 mio Kunas had to be handed over to the Ustasha within 24 hours. The strain on Jewish solidarity was enormous. Many families dug deeply into their financial “survival kits” just to get their relatives and friends out of the claws of these vultures in their fancy uniforms, with their brutal faces and their readiness to kill at any moment.

By mid-May all the Jews in Zagreb had to register, the more “sensitive” and politically active groups first – the students, the journalists, the lawyers and other liberal professions.
At the same time the University was taken over by the Ustasha, and with it Rudolf’s studies came to an abrupt end. It was the beginning of a new semester. When he arrived at the building of the medical faculty one morning to register in time he was thrown out. It was as simple as that. “ No, you Jewish bastard, you will never enter this University again,” an Ustasha militiaman yelled at him. He seemed to be slightly drunk already. Rudolf looked into a pair of bloodshot eyes, kept his mouth shut and went away. Here was a man who probably hadn’t even finished primary school, but he had the power to stop his academic career.

The high schools ended their term earlier than normal. A “national revolution” had taken place, new teachers had to be brought in and the old Yugoslav schoolbooks were of no use any more. Blanka was given a provisional certificate of studies – like all others in her class. After six years she had to interrupt her formal education for quite a while. From now on Life would be the great teacher.

…and an almost unbelievable naiveté

Nevertheless, an almost unbelievable naiveté still reigned among most of the Jews in Zagreb. The Kandels and the Selingers were no exception. Rudolf recalls the discussions of those weeks:
"Sure, there was the brutal tyranny of the Ustasha. They were completely unpredictable and lacked even the most basic discipline. Their leaders had let loose the mob, and they knew it. No – to be more precise – they wanted it this way.
There had been the tales of the refugees whom my father tried to help until the very last moment. There was the growing repression with its daily chicaneries.
But nobody had the slightest idea that behind all these individual crimes a policy of systematic annihilation was in the making. We were deeply afraid of the Ustasha. What we did not consider were the intentions of their German masters. Well, we had heard about the „camps" in Croatia and on German territory, but we did not learn about Jasenovac, let alone Auschwitz, until much, much later. And what happened to the Jewish communities of Amsterdam or Thessalonica, we would learn only after the war."

Furthermore, there was a wide-spread feeling that the bloody German adventure could not last for very long. Discussions on that topic had started in 1940 already. How could Nazi Germany possibly take on the whole of Western Europe? Later on in 1941, when Hitler assaulted the Soviet Union as well, many Jews – most of them already in exile, hiding or in the concentration camps - believed that he would lose the war now very quickly. Hitler faced many more enemies than Napoleon - and look what had happened to the French emperor!
In the beginning of the war even intelligent people like Mavro Kandel and others grossly underestimated the power of their enemies and the ultimate size of the dangers lying ahead. It was only gradually that this naïve perception changed.

Mavro for instance started to definitely prepare the emigration of the Kandel family only when he was warned about Herr Blum's questions regarding B'nai B'rith. He contacted some of his old friends in other parts of former Yugoslavia; he prepared alternative escape routes.
The Selingers did nothing yet. Bertha and her sisters lacked the foresight of the men in the family, Zivko and Mirko, both prisoners-of-war at that time. They were aware of the danger, but they did not act.
Uncle Egon, who had become very active in the Jewish Community, warned them time and again.

The family had to be very cautious, especially as long as the German officer was still living in the study. He might have been a gentleman – so far so good. But what would happen if he didn't keep his mouth shut? And what if he came across any sign of an imminent escape of his hosts?

Lavoslav Steiner offers the most tragic example of this indecision. He had all the necessary clearances to immigrate into the USA. Via connections his daughter does not know about he had been offered fake documents, which would have made the whole family Greek-Orthodox. He refused them.
Their apartment was confiscated by the Germans to house Franz Abromeit, Adolf Eichmann's henchman for Croatia. There are documents proving that an Ustasha "dignitary" even protested this confiscation, since he had hoped to grab this apartment for himself. It goes without saying that such a protest was of no avail.

Abromeit occupied the apartment, and the Steiners simply moved to another one. Lavoslav would not take the escape alternative. He trusted his medals from the First World War more than all the advice he should have listened to.
Would anybody dare to persecute and arrest a well-decorated former Austrian officer?
When the truth finally dawned upon him, it was too late already.

At the doors of Hell: a narrow and nearly miraculous rescue

As early as April the Ustasha had opened a "reception center" on the premises of "Zagrebacki Zbor", a former international fair ground, which was in disuse by then. It should not stand idle for very long.
On the 29th of April some 160 young men, all between 16 and 22 years of age and all of them politically active in one way or another, were ordered to present themselves in this "center".
Upon arrival they were all brought into one of the former exhibit halls. Worn-out mattresses had been placed on the ground and rotten chairs had been placed along the walls. Some rudimentary sanitary installations had been erected in one of the corners. When the young men looked out of the dirty windows their eyes fell on the former French pavilion right across the street.

Ironically enough it still bore the famous inscription “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité”. The colors were faded, but the text still was clearly readable.

And then an Ustasha militiaman showed up. The young men had to stand to attention. He stretched his shoulders as if he wanted to inflate himself in his ridiculous uniform.
And then he shouted at the top of his rather high voice : “Until now you have behaved in a repulsive way! You are all potential traitors! However, you are young and you might have been seduced by others. That is why Croatia (he really said “Croatia”!) will not punish you the way you deserve.”
His voice had faded a bit, so that the Ustasha cleared his throat before continuing: “You will go to a special camp to work and help build the Croatian “Fatherland”. And we will re-educate you over there. Did you understand me?”
When he glanced around with his eyes rolling wildly he looked more like a peacock or a turkey than like a normal human being. The general murmur of his audience did not satisfy him at all.
He shouted again: “Did you understand me?” He didn’t take “yes” for an answer, either. He shrieked: “Yes, Sir!” Everybody did his best to say “Yes, Sir!”, and the Ustasha made a perfectly theatrical exit.
The young men, having just witnessed a totally unlikely scene, didn’t know if they should laugh or cry.

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Rudolf Kandel was one of them.
After some discussion, he and his friends had believed the story of the Ustasha officer. How could they have imagined otherwise? A few of them had even brought their guitars and their knapsacks. And an accordion was there as well. All in all, Rudolf thought, why should it be so different from the good Maccabi times? Nobody anticipated a holiday trip; but nobody anticipated anything really evil or brutal either.

What happened next, was an unbelievable strike of luck.
Only two days earlier Rudolf had had to undergo a small chirurgical intervention in his frontal cavity. His nasal tubes were too narrow, resulting in pain and regular inflammations.
He was still wearing bloody tampons in his nostrils when he presented himself at “Zagrebacki Zbor”. In the evening he played “Schnapsln”, an old and popular Austrian card - game, with one of the Ustasha guards.

He happened to know him since he had supplied their apartment with firewood until recently. This man was one of the few guards who were not drunk. Rudolf won some money.
He could have called his claims but he did not do it because he remembered the dire social situation of his “partner”.

The next morning this guard, accompanied by an “officer”, came to see him. He was summoned from a general round of physical exercises and was told by the officer to go back home at once. He should present himself again when his wounds were healed and these “distasteful tampons” were removed. Rudolf disagreed with this order because he wanted to stay with his companions. But in the end he obeyed. Rudolf went home; he didn’t suspect anything!

Two or three days later he presented himself again. The tampons were gone. He remembers: “ I told the same officer that I was re-established and that I wanted to join my group. This man looked at me as if I were a lunatic. And then he yelled at me ‘Go to hell! It is up to us to decide if you stay or not! ‘ ”

He left the premises. At the entrance of the compound he ran across the guard he had played cards with. This man took him by the sleeves of his shirt, shook his head mockingly and said: “Why do you think that we have sent you away, hah?” Rudolf still did not understand and said so. And then the guard told him: “ You let me have my money. And I will let you have a lot more!. Wait – you will find out early enough.” With it, he turned around and disappeared behind the small barrack flanking the entrance.

The following day the first member of this group was brutally clubbed to death by an Ustasha killer while staying at the provisional Danica camp, an abandoned sulphuric acid factory at Koprivnica, close to Zagreb. This horrible scene was witnessed and told by local people. The story spread rapidly.

For Rudolf, the doors of Hell had closed and opened again. For his friends they would remain sealed.

The end of this group of fine young people has been terrible. After a first stop at the Koprivicna factory most of them have been deported to the Jadovno concentration camp and killed there.

Most of them have been murdered by being hurled over a steep cliff and then gunned down at the bottom.
Only six young men out of a group of some 160 have survived. One of them was lucky enough to escape from the Jasenovac camp around Christmas. He swam across the icy Sava River and joined a partisan unit.
Two others were set free by Ustasha guards who had been bribed. And only three should survive the camps.

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As of the 23rd of May all Jews in Yugoslavia were ordered to wear a special badge marked by a clearly visible "Z" for "Zidov", which is Serbo-Croatian for "Jew". These badges were distributed at the office of the Jewish community. Rudolf went there to pick up the badges for his whole family. And once again, his reaction was unbelievably naïve.
Since these badges were made out of a poor cotton cloth and wrinkled quite easily, Rudolf wrapped his in cellophane to keep it in shape! He used a safety pin to fix the badge to his clothes.
And Blanka recalls that she did not take the badge very seriously either. She had it in her handbag, but she didn't wear it often.

One morning she had to pass a street with a Catholic church. A group of young Croats was hanging around at the doorsteps. One of the girls, a former classmate from her school, recognized her and shouted: "Look, there walks Blanka! She is Jewish, but she doesn't wear her badge!"

Blanka froze in her steps. But then she continued walking without turning around. She was scared stiff and waiting for the worst. Nothing happened. The youngster at the doorsteps of the church did not follow her.
She knew, however, that from now on she would be an outcast in her own hometown. There would be only very few people she could really trust. And her old classmates would not be amongst them.

When the news of the student killed in the sulphuric acid factory reached the Kandels, Mavro knew that both he and Rudolf were in considerable danger.

No way for his son to show up at the Ustasha again! The next time they would take him in and deliver him to an unknown, possibly horrible fate. No, Rudolf had to avoid contact with these bastards at any cost!
But what would happen if would come one day and look for him? Couldn't this present a great risk for the rest of the whole family?

Days of great nervousness and anguish followed. Cecilia, Mavro and Rudolf left the house only when it was absolutely indispensable. Then, one evening in early June, Mavro took his son aside for a quiet chat.

„Listen, Rudolf," he explained, „ you will have to get out of Croatia as quickly as possible. You are here like a sitting target, and we cannot always count on your proverbial good luck. No, you have to leave the country. Fortunately enough there are safe ways to do it. There are groups of professionals, ‚escape assistants', and I have contacted one of them. He asks a lot of money, but his scheme seems absolutely foolproof to me".
Rudolf turned stiff. „Very well, I flee," he retorted. „But what will happen to you, to Mama, to Sophia, her husband and the rest of the family?"
„I have thought about that, too." His father said maintained his quiet resolve. „ I believe that we will be left in peace for the time being. But as soon as we are asked to present ourselves at the Fair Grounds, we will escape as well. Believe me," he added, " I have everything prepared. There is no need to be worried".
"You must be joking!" Rudolf interjected. "Mister Kandel, the president of B'nai B'rith, will be left in peace?" Mavro looked at him. He still was absolutely quiet. " I know and you are right. But I will not leave Zagreb without Mama. And she is not yet prepared to do it."

And then he laid out his plans. A resigned Rudolf agreed. Absolute secrecy was of paramount importance; not even the women were to be in the know.

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Two days later the „escape assistant" sent an officially looking document announcing Rudolf's immediate transfer to a „labor camp". Mavro gathered the family that same evening. He had even asked Sophia to drop by.
When he had informed all of them about the contents of that document,

Cecilia and Sophia were deeply shocked. Rudolf in the hands of the Ustasha and perhaps – who could know? – of the Nazis! Impossible! Cecilia nearly yelled: „ I won't let him go! Never! I don't want him to get killed!" And Sophia suggested: „ Why don't you simply run away?"

The two men tried their best to keep things calm. Hadn't Rudolf always wanted to be with his friends?
Well, in the labor camp he would meet some of them again. And weren't the rumors about the brutal treatment on the hands of the Ustasha exaggerated anyhow? Wouldn't the risks of torture and death be greater if he was apprehended somewhere in the streets?
In the end, and with a lot of grievance, the women gave in to what seemed inevitable. Cecilia instructed the maid, which still had the courage to work for a Jewish family. She was to get some suitcases from the basement and pack them with everything Rudolf would need for a prolonged stay. She told her son that she had sewn a few gold ducats into the fodder of his best jacket.
It was difficult to find some sleep that night. The men looked at the next day with a considerable tension, and the women did so with deep distress.

The following morning the same fake Ustasha rang the doorbell. He had arrived in the very early hours in order to avoid any unnecessary attention. When the maid, visibly afraid, opened the door, he stepped into the anteroom and shouted :
„ I have come to pick up a certain Rudolf Kandel!"
The family gathered around Rudolf to bid him farewell. Their faces were sad and taut; the maid could not help but cry.
When he left the house, his parents behaved exactly the way you would assume parents to behave under similar circumstances. Mavro admonished him to work and to behave well in the camp. And Cecilia added:" Take care of your clothes. And don't forget to write as soon as you have arrived!"

Of course, for the men all this was a charade of quasi-operatic proportions. It simply was necessary to protect the family if and when Rudolf's disappearance would be discovered. But Cecilia had to take it on face-value.

The „Ustasha" dragged Rudolf and his luggage on the loading-

platform of a small van. He had stolen it during the night. They drove to Zagreb Main Station, which was conveniently close to the house where the Kandels lived.
It may have seemed strange to see a militiaman carrying the luggage of a very young fellow – but nobody took notice. Together, they boarded the morning train to Lubljana, the capital of Italian – controlled Slovenia. The "escape assistant" had bought two tickets the day before so that they could board the train right away.

The first lap of the trip was short; Slovenia was just 25 miles away, barely enough to bring the old coal-heated locomotive to full power. When they approached the border station, Rudolf was ordered to hide his money between the pages of a fascist Croatian magazine and to put it on the luggage rack.
He was somewhat reluctant. His father had provided him with a nice sum of Swiss Franks and Italian Lire, which – some of the old relations were still intact – he had exchanged at „his" bank.
But his travel companion reassured him. He explained that this was the best way to get through with the luggage and body inspections at the border. Rudolf gave in.

And the "Ustasha" was completely right! Two agents of the Slovenian Border Police entered the compartment on the Croatian side of the border station. They searched the suitcases. Rudolf had to empty all pockets and to answer a few questions. Nobody paid any attention to the magazine in the luggage rack.
When they inspected Rudolf's passport, the agents got suspicious. "How come?" one of them inquired. "You told us that you arrived from Zagreb. Yet, your passport gives you nationality as 'Yugoslav' ." Rudolf explained that he had not found the time yet to go to the passport office and to change the nationality to „Croatian". This explanation was accepted.
At the Slovenian side of the border station the „Ustasha" left the train, bade Rudolf good-bye and looked for the next connection back to Zagreb.

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It was rather warm in the compartments, and nobody dared to open the windows. The locomotive simply produced too much soot. Rudolf dozed off and woke up again when he had arrived at his destination.

He had arrived in Lubljana – finally! For the moment at least he felt rather safe and at ease.
He rented a room in one of the inexpensive boarding house close to the station and changed some money at a nearby exchange dealer. Then, he went to the next postal office nearby, called his father and left his new address. It was a day later that Mavro would talk to the family and give them the true story.

After a late luncheon and a cup of good, Italian coffee, Rudolf took a walk to explore the center of the city.
Lubljana was a beautiful midsize town, serene and orderly – but not to be compared to Zagreb. There were many people in the streets, not many men in uniforms, and the whole mood seemed to be friendly and relaxed. And – there was absolutely nobody wearing badges with the „Jew“ sign. What a civilized world!, Rudolf thought.
Well, he had taken off his badge before leaving home. In an attack of sentimentality he had hidden it in one of his socks. Rudolf would never wear such a badge again. But he always kept it and, as far as I know, it still is somewhere between his personal belongings.

Blanka's escape

Immediately after the German invasion Selinger & Sons, run by Egon Polak after Zivko had joined the army, had lost almost all of their business. Egon still went to the office, but there was not much more to do than keep some order, call in the arrears, pay all the debts and clear the bank accounts.

Furthermore, he was becoming increasingly suspicious of a notoriously unreliable janitor who had shown his sympathy with the Ustasha for quite a while. What would this man do now? Wouldn't he spy on the family; wouldn't he fabricate damaging stories and calumnies?
This fear was proven right, unfortunately. Zivko's and Egon's company was confiscated two weeks later, as so many Jewish businesses were. Barely disguising this act of robbery, the Croatian authorities sent "commissars" to these companies.
And, of all people, the janitor took over as caretaker! Egon had to leave the premises immediately. Afterwards, he became even more active in the management of the Jewish community, to the Board of which he had been elected quite a while ago.

Blanka and the other women barely left their premises any more. It was Egon who helped them with food and other necessities.

They started talking about emigration again - especially when Blanka's schooldays had come to a close. But even then it was difficult to reach a decision. If they left, what would become of Zivko and Mirko? The Selingers still hoped that both of them would be released before very long.

But then the decision was taken out of their hands. It was the 17th of July, an exceptionally beautiful summer evening, when Egon arrived – pale and visibly shaken. "You have to leave immediately!" he told them. " As of tomorrow the Ustasha will proceed to our systematic deportation to the camps! The lists are prepared and I have been able to look at them. These bastards have ordered our community to cooperate!"
Blanka's mother didn't understand. "When do we have to leave? Next week? Next month?" she asked incredulously. "What do you mean?" an agitated Egon. " You have to leave tonight, tomorrow at latest! The arrests are scheduled according to age groups, in alphabetical order and according to regions of residence. There is no time to waste!"

When the women had resigned to the inevitable Egon rapidly regained his composure. He handed out some forged papers, which allowed them to travel to Lubljana for "urgent family reasons". And he gave them the number of a bank account in the Slovenian capital. This account went under the name of "Mr. and Mrs. Selinger" and held a modest amount of money. Egon had acted for all of them, but not for himself.

The Selingers packed one suitcase for each person. Bertha took care of the documents and made sure that the jewels and the golden Louisdor coins were well hidden.
In the evening she went to see the Rublikovs , their neighbors in the house with whom they had build a correct, albeit not very personal relationship. She explained their situation to Mr. Rublikov and asked him if she could leave the most valuable carpets and some silverware in their custody. "Don't be afraid," Mrs. Rublikova eagerly answered for her husband, " we will take good care of your belongings. You know that we have no political leanings whatsoever. You can trust us".

The next morning Bertha and Blanka got up early. Silverware and tapestry were carried over to the Rublikovs.

When this had been done, Bertha went to see Mr. Guttman, a Czech architect, who had built the house and owned it. When she left the keys of the apartment with him, she had to hide some tears. They had been happy here, and now everything was gone in a matter of hours!
Mr. Guttman tried to console her. "Mrs. Selinger," he smiled with some difficulty," this ugly nightmare will be over soon. Then you will come back, your husband and your brother-in-law will return home as well and we will have a big party. And in the meantime, I will try to keep the apartment available for you as long as I can reasonably do it".

"May God listen to you," Bertha muttered, shook hands and went downstairs.
One hour later, the Selingers took the train, Blanka, her mother and her brother first. Aunt Zenka and aunt Böshka followed in the afternoon. They all crossed the border without any difficulty. And Otto picked up his aunts.
Upon arrival in Lubljana they all went to a modest hotel in Lubljana's downtown area.

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Egon Polak has stayed behind. He has helped the Jews of Zagreb with great courage and indefatigable energy.
He had to overcome deepest poverty, utter humiliation and occasional maltreatment by the hands of the Ustasha. But he never wavered.
On the 10th of May 1943 he has been deported with all the other remaining Jewish leaders of Zagreb and Osijek. They have been brought to Auschwitz-Birkenau and sent to the gas chambers.
His wife and two children were hidden by Catholic nuns at a monastery deep in the Balkan Mountains. They survived the Shoah and went to Israel in 1949, where they still live.

Sophia and her friends : A trio dispersed

Zdenka Slovak had come back from Great Britain relatively quickly after her arrival in London on July 15th 1939. She had taken up her summer courses immediately. However, she was aware of the fact that War had become more or less imminent.

Everybody talked about it, and the "inspired" comments in the newspapers and in the radio program all pointed into the same direction. The authorities had started the first exercises in civil defense – camouflages on a large scale, protection of major monuments and alarm drills.
End of August she got a late call from the Yugoslav Embassy. She was ordered to leave the country immediately, since it would be only a matter of days until hostilities on a large scale would break out. Zdenka Slovak hated to end her precious grant period when it was only in the middle.

However she gave in, packed and headed for Victoria Station where all the lamps had already been painted blue in order to dim the light. She caught a night train to Paris, and when she arrived there, France was in a state of General Mobilization.
Zdenka continued her trip right away – without even trying to reach anybody there. She arrived in Zagreb on August 29th 1939, just two days before the Germans assaulted Poland.

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From then onwards the three young women, who had been buddies from early childhood, were reunited again. Zdenka gave private lessons in English, Mira Hoffmann had gone to University, and Sophia Eisner, Rudolf's sister, had become a good housewife. Her husband Walter did well in the watches business. He liked to be with his wife, so that he had to put up a brave face when Sophia went to see her friends or received them at their home for an apparently endless chat. And when Mira Hoffmann married in 1940, her husband did not create any fuzz, either.

This inseparable trio was dispersed during the dramatic spring weeks of 1941.
Sophia went first. As soon as her husband Walter had come home from his brief period in the Yugoslav army, they prepared their emigration. Suitable documents were at hand very quickly, and the Eisners left Zagreb in early May. They "emigrated" to Split in the Italian-controlled areas on the Dalmatian coast.
Mira and her husband were the next to go. When her uncle Joseph, a prominent member of B'nai B'rith, was arrested, they fled in panic and without proper papers. The Ustasha controlled the train at the border station close to Rijeka. When they found Mira and her husband without

documents, they dragged them out of the train and pushed them along the platform. It was announced to them that they would be shot without much ado.
The two young people were totally horrified and looked for protection. There was an Italian patrol on the platform – just twenty meters away. But the Ustasha slugs dragged them into the opposite direction!

And then a baby started to cry immediately ahead of them. It was lying on a bench, wrapped in a blanket. Had the mother gone to get some water? Had the baby been left there on purpose? Nobody knew – but the militiamen were distracted.
Mira's husband grabbed her arm, and they ran for their lives. Mira's suitcase fell on the platform. She didn't dare to stop. There was only one thought in her mind: "Now they will shoot at us!"
The Ustasha turned around, but the refugees were already getting too close to the Italian patrol to use a gun. And the Italians let them run – until they had reached the main building of the station and were in safety.

Zdenka Slovak was still giving English lessons, when a non-Jewish girl friend came to see her one early morning. "You have to leave immediately! I have seen your name on a deportation list!" As it turned out this young woman was working in an office where those lists were distributed. She had found Zdenka's name with the following remark: "This woman may be spying for the English".
Zdenka did not dare to explain that giving English lessons does not necessarily make you a spy. She hid with another friend who procured her with a forged Italian travel document.
Since she knew that her friend Sophia was in Split she took the train on July 26th – with the scarcest of luggage and just 500 Dinars in her pockets. This train to Split should be the last regular one.
On the following day, that same train was blown up by Yugoslav partisans. After the war, July 27th should become the Yugoslav National Holiday – in order to remember this extraordinary display of courage.

Upon arrival in Split Zdenka went to look for Sophia, whose address she did not have. She found the quarters where most of the Jews were living. And why she strolled around she whistled a melody the girls had always used in Zagreb to contact each other.
It was the lead melody of the second movement of Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony". After an hour or so, somebody answered from an open window!

Sophia had heard her friend whistling! And two members of the trio were together again, albeit for a short period only. Sophia and Walter Eisner would leave for Milan only a couple of days later.

Zdenka Slovak has been lucky.
But her father has been killed at the Jasenovac concentration camp on September 17th. And her mother has been deported "to the East" on August 10th 1942. When her daughter had left, she had given her two diamond clips and a chain of pearls.
Zdenka has never worn them – until this very day.

The tragic fate of the Steiners

As I have noted earlier, Lavoslav Steiner had prepared his family's escape quite carefully. But he didn't take them out while it still was time. When the systematic arrests began on the 22nd of June, Zdenka, her husband Fritz Brichta and her brother-in-law were among the first to be brought to the Zagrebacki Zbor "reception center". They were shouted at, pushed around and beaten. Men and women were separated ruthlessly.

The helpless women crammed into the very hall Rudolf had been in two months earlier. They had to senselessly clean even the remotest corners of the dirty building. And when they looked at the famous motto of the French Revolution across the street, it was with sadness and cynicism. At least, there were no rapes.
A brief "selection procedure" took place the following morning. Zdenka was ordered to go home. She does not know why this happened since no explanation was being given to her.
While leaving the big hall, she saw her husband for the last time. Fritz Brichta and his brother would be deported to Pag Island where they found a cruel death.

When Zdenka had returned she immediately went to her parents' house. She urged them to leave right away. Her father agreed on the spot. Since he had provided Italian transit papers („Lasciapassari" as they were called), their escape should not have been too difficult. They had not been asked yet to register.

Lavoslav Steiner made a fatal mistake, however. Instead of leaving right away he asked his family to stay for a few days. He wanted to handle some additional financial arrangements.

On the 27th of June, Zdenka's parents and her sister Mira had to present themselves at Zagrebacki Zbor. They were given only a few hours to arrive there. In a desperate move Lavoslav Steiner tried to save his family and himself from arrest. He sent an urgent petition to the authorities explaining that his wife was seriously ill and that the "commissar" at his recently confiscated company was not yet acquainted with the business.
Even this „commissar" supported the petition. He knew perfectly well that he would be incapable of running Lavoslav's business without the help of the latter.

The answer of the Ustasha Police – Jewish Section – was brief and final. On the 28 th of June they wrote: " In view that the Jew is a Freemason the petition cannot be approved". His B'nai B'rith membership sealed Lavoslav's fate. "Freemason" – that was the way the ill-informed Germans and their Croat helpers looked at this venerable organization!

The Steiners were arrested that same day. Only Zdenka was spared since she was living at a different address and her name was Brichta. When she went to her parents' home and found it empty she rushed to the "reception center" which she knew all too well already. Zdenka was in tears and shivering.
She was allowed to see her family for a couple of minutes. When Zdenka said good-bye to her parents and her sister they did not know yet that it would be the last farewell.
Her father died in the Jasenovac concentration camp in November 1941. The official reason for his death has been given as "pneumonia". Her mother and her sister have disappeared in the big maelstrom called Shoah.

FIRST EXILE - FIRST LOVE

1941 (after Hitler's assault on the Soviet Union)

Germany

Hitler attacks the Soviet Union on the 22nd of June without any declaration of war. During the next weeks the Germans rapidly conquer all of Russia west of the Dnjepr River. They approach the outskirts of Moscow and Leningrad. The latter is encircled and besieged. The Soviet government is transferred to Kuibyschew.
In September, the "Euthanasia Program" is terminated. Some 80.000 Germans have fallen victim to it. The infamous "Judenstern" is introduced for all Jews in Germany more than six years old. Some weeks later all official Jewish emigration is suddenly stopped.
The Japanese raid Pearl Harbor and Hitler declares war on the United States of America on the 11th of December. The German armies on Soviet territory are stopped by the winter and stiff resistance.

Italy

In July most of the Italian forces in Ethiopia capitulate.
In August all foreign newspapers are forbidden. The Royal Air Force heavily bombards Italian cities.
After taking over full civil control of those areas an Italian enquiry commission visits the abandoned concentration camps of Jadovno and Pag Island. Deeply shocked the military and civil authorities in Rome decide to stop all transfers of Jews to the Croats or the Germans. A group of important Italian military leaders starts to oppose all anti-Semitic policies and to obstruct German demands from now on. Amongst them are:

- *General Ambrosio (Commander of the Italian Army in Croatia)*
- *General Roatta (his successor)*
- *General Robotti*
- *Ambassador Castellani*

Mussolini declares war on the United States of America on the 11th of December. Berlin and Rome act in unison.

Croatia

Italy assumes civilian control over the Dalmatian coast in order to stop the atrocities against minorities committed by the Ustasha régime. Prior to that, the concentration camps of Jadovno and Pag Island had been dissolved by the Croats. These camps are replaced by the Jasenovac camp, some 60 miles to the Southeast of Zagreb. Jasenovac, run by the Ustasha, becomes the place of systematic killings of Jews, Serbs and Gypsies until 1945. Until August 1942, some 20.000 Jews have been murdered there. Later on, the remaining Croatian Jews have been deported to Auschwitz.

The Jewish People

Some 15.000 Romanian Jews are murdered in the "Jassy Progrom" in June .The Germans occupy Bialystok and kill 2.000 Jews.
During the summer German forces and Romanian special units murder 150.000 Jews in Bessarabia. In Wilna 5.000 Jews are killed. The first Ghettos are erected.
Thousands are killed in the Ukrainian massacre at L'vov. Many, many more are to follow in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union. Within two days in September 34.000 Kiev Jews are killed by German units at Babi-Jar.
The Belzec extermination camp is erected as of November, the Chelmno extermination camp as of December. The first deportations to the Theresienstadt take place at the same time.

Lubljana – a point of transit

Lubljana was a beautiful city, indeed, marked by a serene and relaxed atmosphere. There were green hills all around, speckled by the red tiled roofs of farmhouses. Summer had brought with it some humid heat. In the afternoons, it built into immense masses of dark clouds over the mountains. A short and intense thunderstorm would follow, and afterwards the air would be clear and cool again.
The lively streets were filled with many young people, strolling around, having a coffee, chatting and enjoying life. The Slovenes were dressed somewhat more simply than the elegant Italians who had made it to

Lubljana. However, that was the only difference between them. And they mingled quite easily. When the many bells in the baroque church-towers rang, almost everybody felt invited to attend a religious service. Yet, these were only brief intermezzos in a generally liberal and mundane place.
Lubljana was not to be compared with Zagreb, but it was a really nice town.

Rudolf liked to be here. He felt safe and at ease. And yet, he had no intention to stay in the Slovenian capital for too long. He wanted to reach Italy as soon as possible.
To his taste, Lubljana was much too close to the terror régimes of Germany and Croatia. The Italians were there – all right. But what if they would leave the country as part of some big scheme? Furthermore, it would be difficult to find a job or to study there. As far as he knew there was not even a medical faculty in town. All in all, the Slovenian capital held no real future for him.

In the meantime, his parents had arrived in Lubljana as well.
Back in Zagreb their lives had been in great danger. Step by step, the first members of B'nai B'rith had been arrested and brought to the concentration camp on Pag Island where most of them were murdered. Apparently Herr Blum had put his list to good use.
And then, on the 22nd of June, a first program of systematic deportation began. Mavro and Cecilia were ordered to register as well, and they had no Egon Polak to warn them beforehand. Later on, Mavro always wondered if the coincidence of this date with the day Hitler started his assault on the Soviet Union was purely accidental. Perhaps that very day the Nazis said to themselves that they could abandon any pretence.

Anyhow, Mavro and Cecilia had to show up at the "reception center" at Zagrebacki Zbor. Mavro tried to contact the man who had been helpful in Rudolf's escape, but he had disappeared somehow. As a consequence the carefully elaborated contingency planning would not work. Rudolf's parents gathered their personal belongings and two small suitcases they had prepared for such an eventuality.
They registered at Zagrebacki Zbor, only to be treated as nastily as all inmates before them. They tried to be brave, but especially Mavro feared for the worst. When his pulse beat like mad and he nearly passed out, he had to be helped by other Jews with a lot of encouraging words, some water and a plum brandy, which arrived from nowhere.

In another strike of luck, aunt Ruzha came to visit the Kandels that very day. She had not yet been asked to register. Ruzha rang the bell repeatedly, but nobody opened. And then, one of the neighbors opened her window cautiously and told her:"The Kandels have gone, with their light coats on and small suitcases. Well, these are sad days for the Jews." She closed the window again.

Ruzha reacted immediately. From former times she knew a man who had become very influential within Zagreb's Ustasha hierarchy. Ruzha hoped that he would be open to persuasion. They had gone out together for a while, and Ruzha had known him as a reasonable fellow.
She rushed to his office and pleaded for assistance. And her instincts proved right. The Ustasha official could be persuaded, especially when one of Rudolf's old friends at the bank, whom Ruzha had called from the office, came over and helped with a sizeable amount of money.
After two days of ordeal the two were released. They urged Ruzha to come with them and gained Slovenia via another escape route.
The unbelievable tension of these days had caused Mavro a light heart attack. As it turned out, he would never fully recover from it – until the end of his life.

Upon arrival in Lubljana Mavro looked for the address he had been given by his son. The parents and aunt Ruzha moved into the same boarding house where Rudolf was staying already. He was not in when they arrived there. He was in a coffeehouse, playing a game of chess with another Jewish émigré.
But when he came back the family reunion was very emotional. His parents told him all about the last horrible days, but they had brought good news as well. His sister Sophia and her husband Walter Eisner had made it to Split in Dalmatia. They had procured themselves with valid visa for Cuba and were actively preparing their emigration.

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While he was glad to be with his parents Rudolf wanted to stand on his own feet as best as he could. He counted his money, left the boarding house and rented a small apartment not too far away. But he visited his parents almost every day.
Rudolf knew that he had to attack two major challenges if he wanted to make it to Italy.

First of all, he had to learn Italian – "full speed ahead" – as he recalls it. Since there was not much else to do he dug into this most beautiful of all languages for many hours every day. All his school reports show him as a student who was very gifted for languages. No wonder then, that he made rapid progress.
Furthermore he needed the necessary documents to cross the border. He had none of them.

There were some simple coffeehouses and inexpensive restaurants in Lubljana, which had become the favorite meeting places of the Jewish refugees. The ladies would go there for a coffee, a piece of cake and the gossip of the day - as well dressed as circumstances allowed it. The men would come for a drink and unending discussions about the political situation. And the youngsters just hung around since there was not much else to do anyhow.
These places were valuable spots to gather all sorts of information. And one evening Rudolf heard an elderly man speaking about a Slovenian priest, one of the many unsung heroes of this horrible period. This man of God was prepared to issue forged certificates of baptism and other affidavits to save Jews in danger. We do not know his name, unfortunately.

Rudolf asked his vis-à-vis for help. He never met the priest himself, because these contacts had to be kept secret and were established via a middleman. But he got what he wanted.
When he visited his parents in the evening he waved a document in front of their astonished faces. It was a certificate of baptism, issued to a certain "Giovanni Kandel". After he had returned to his apartment he sat down and very carefully added an "i" to his last name. Rudolf Kandel, the Jew from Zagreb, had become, for all practical purposes, "Giovanni Kandeli", a Slovene with a conveniently Italian name.
The next day he visited his parents again and showed them the result of his work. " And now I will get some documents for all of us," he announced optimistically.

Well, Lady Luck smiled at him again.
The building next door to his apartment was inhabited by some Italian police officers with their families.

He used to greet his neighbors when they met in front of the houses or looked at each others from their terraces and balconies in the backyards. Rudolf liked to practice his Italian with them and had started to befriend Cesare, a young and very likeable fellow. The two men had found common ground quite quickly.

Cesare came from a socialist family in Umbria and was a left-winger himself. He abhorred any form of anti-Semitism and despised what was going on in the realm of the Nazi criminals.

"Of course I will try to help you, my friend!" Cesare exclaimed. "You and your family need 'lasciapassari'? You will get them! But," he added with a note of caution," it will take a while. And you will never ask me how I did it. Agreed?"
Of course Rudolf agreed. He had invited the police officer to his apartment for an after-dinner drink. Once again, he had told him all he knew about the dire fate of the European Jewry. And when Cesare was visibly touched, he had placed his request.

The young Italian returned after a couple of days. He drew an envelope from under his jacket and handed it out to his friend. When Rudolf opened it he found four transit documents, called "lasciapassari" in Italian. That was a lot less than real passports, but it was a lot more than nothing. Here were their entrance tickets to Italy, valid for six months and for the whole of the country! Another problem had been solved.

Rudolf embraced Cesare in a sign of deep gratitude. When he reached for his purse, the officer pushed him back and opened his arms in a typically Italian gesture. "No money, please! My friend, I have done this as a sign of friendship, not for a little perk on the side."
Rudolf insisted, half mockingly, and Cesare refused, half mockingly as well. In the end, they struck a compromise. There was a highly reputed Jewish shoemaker in town. The two men went there, and the Italian was rewarded with a very fine pair of shoes.

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The timing of Rudolf's move was excellent. Since Benito Mussolini wanted to formally annex Slovenia later on, the Italian authorities treated the Slovenes particularly well. They simply wanted to win them over to their cause.

The Slovenes were given ample opportunity to travel and thus to get acquainted with Italian culture, the Italian way of life and – hopefully – with Italian politics. The fact that young Slovenes were not drafted into the Italian armed forces constituted an additional advantage.
The Slovenes remained polite and accepted the goodies handed out by their Italian occupiers. But among themselves they smiled. They were not to be had!

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"Why are you in such a hurry?" his mother asked him. "We have just come to Lubljana and like it quite well. We have met people we know from Zagreb and don't want to leave them right away.
We want to go to Italy, of course, but we have to learn the language a little better….."
Rudolf, his parents and aunt Ruzha were sitting around a small table in the empty hotel restaurant. Initially, they had wanted to play a deck of cards, but then Rudolf had surprised them with the announcement that he would leave Lubljana and travel to Milan the next morning. He had suggested that they would follow him a few days later, when he had found a suitable lodging.

And now his mother was pleading with him. He didn't understand her. She had seemed happy and relieved when they got her their transit documents. And now she didn't want him to use it? She must be afraid of something he wasn't aware of. Anyhow, her arguments were far-fetched and not very convincing.

With great patience he explained the reasons for his decision all over again. And Mavro intervened, before his mother was able to reiterate her objections. "I agree fully with Rudolf, Cilly," he said. "He should go right away. He needs a job or a place at a university. He has to build his future; ours is largely behind us. By the way, he could prepare the ground for us a little, as he has proposed. And then we should go as well!"
Cecilia remained silent. She knew from long experience when it was better not to argue with her husband. It did not happen very often, but there were occasions when his resolve was absolutely firm.

And then Mavro added: " But don't forget to register with the police in Trieste!" Rudolf was baffled.

"What are you talking about, for Heaven's sake?" he asked his father incredulously. "I have never heard about such a proviso!"
"Well, I have and it is an absolute necessity, "Mavro continued. "Every foreign holder of an Italian transit permit has to register with the local police at the port of entry."

All of a sudden it became clear to Rudolf why his mother had seemed to be so scared. If they would register with the Italian police, they would run the risk to be put into some form of confinement, often in very remote places. "Confino", the Italian expression for it, had become quite a household word in Jewish circles. A few of them were even sent to internment camps. And the family might be separated in the process!

"Who gave you such a silly idea?" he exploded. " I will not register, of course. I will go to Milan right away and nobody will ask for me. And you should do the same".
"No way," his father retorted. "I will play it by the rules as I have done throughout my life. I remain convinced that the Italians are civilized people. They will treat us well, as soon as we find the courage to cross the border. And a temporary confinement is not such a bad solution".

Rudolf remained adamant. However, he stopped shouting. He had noted that his father was breathing heavily and didn't want to irritate him too much.
"You and your Austrian, your Wiener Bankverein ethics!" he said. "I agree – in general, the Italian fascists are not to be compared to the Ustasha, let alone the Nazis. But there are real brutes amongst them. Listen, Papa, there are foes out there – our foes. That is the basic truth for you and me, nothing else.
Many of them have burned all the bridges behind them. Be realistic – this can develop into a matter of life and death! And you want to play this game by the rules? Well, I won't. I believe that everything is permitted when survival is at stake. Everything," he added, "except to kill somebody. Anyway, I will not register".

The debate went on for a while. It was Cecilia who, quite contrary to her personal inclination, calmed the spirits down. In the end they agreed that Rudolf would handle the situation the way he saw it. However, he would postpone his trip to Milan for a while. Mother, father and aunt would cross into Italy as soon as they found the courage to do it.

They would register with the Trieste police, and Rudolf would wait for them there. The family defined a poste restante address with the city's main postal office. Furthermore, they would, whenever possible, be in front of the city's Roman theatre around noon each day.

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Before Rudolf left the hotel restaurant to gain his apartment Mavro asked one last question: " And what will happen to Blanka?"
This was a decisive question, indeed. During the last weeks, a new person had entered his life, not quite irrevocably yet, but in a very meaningful way.

Blanka and Rudolf

Quite a group of young Jews had stranded in Lubljana at that time. And as it happens with youngsters all over the world they knew where to find each other.
One could go some cafés downtown. The Jewish ladies would still meet there, have their coffee and their piece of cake. They would still lament their fate, remember the good old days and gossip about those absent. The Jewish men would still sit there, albeit in a different corner, would still play chess or cards and discuss politics. And the youngsters would still hang around with a bottle of mineral water or a glass of wine. They would brag of their latest adventures and make plans.

Rudolf held a special position with the young lads. Not only did he have very clear ideas of what he would do. He had an apartment of his own – with a spacious terrace at that!
And since the youngsters did not want to be with their elders all the time, Rudolf's place became their favorite meeting-point.

It was there that Blanka and Rudolf got to know each other more personally. A first, she found him a bit too haughty and assertive for her taste. He lacked Mario's charm and elegance, but he was handsome and infinitely more interesting!
And he, though he loved her exciting looks very much, thought her to be too vain and superficial. He consoled himself with the hope that he might eventually educate her, a futile hope, as all men know.

Very soon, however, mutual attraction won the upper hand. They started to take more and more time off for themselves. There were the cafés in other parts of the city; there were a few cinemas, there was an inexpensive restaurant or two.
Even better: there were the outings into the hills. It was autumn and the foliage was burning in yellow and red. Blanka remembers a hidden inn, which had become their preferred spot around town. This restaurant offered first-class whipped cream, which she liked so much.

They spent many evenings up there, talking and exploring each other. Yet, the event Blanka recalls was of a quite different nature:
"One late afternoon, a big hen approached our table. It jumped on an empty chair next to us, then on the table. When it started feasting on my whipped cream, I was both mad and scared stiff. But Rudolf simply laughed and ordered a new helping for me".

After a while, attraction became affection and affection became love. They did what all young lovers do: Holding hands in the cinema, touching feet under the table in a café, the first kisses, a shy embrace in the secrecy of Rudolf's apartment.
Very soon all their friends knew it: Blanka and Rudolf – that is not only a flirt. They really mean it! And when the families were informed, a little later as is the habit around the world, the liaison became "official" to some extent.

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However, that kind of relationship was remarkably different of what young people take for granted nowadays.
At those times, everything had to follow the traditional rules, even under the exceptional circumstances of an exile. They were of course not allowed to live together; Blanka, not yet 17 at that time, had to be home each and every evening. There were no nights out and, before marriage or at least a formal engagement all sorts of sexual encounter were out of the question. And even if they had thought of a formal engagement, it would not have happened. For young Jews, marriage has to follow as soon as is reasonably feasible. And marriage, of course, was completely impossible.

For the rest, it was as it has always been and will always be. And so, even in the turmoil and the horror surrounding them,

young people like Blanka and Rudolf approached the future rather with curiosity and not so much with apprehension. They wanted to live and to do it together! And don't all of us deeply understand such an attitude?

There was love between two young Jews living in a world of horror, war and betrayal. And love is much more important than anything else. It will not give in to pressure, or even terror. And it will never be betrayed. Blanka and Rudolf still are together – after 60 years. And they still love each other – after 60 years. They have been blessed – in spite of all that has happened in the meantime!

That is why Mavro's last question was a decisive one. And that is why the story of Blanka and Rudolf becomes a common one from now on. They may have been separated from time to time. But the wonderful bond of love has always held them together.

Intermezzo on the Adriatic Sea

"Well," Rudolf replied to his father's question, " I have already talked to Blanka and her family. Blanka's mother has procured transit permits for all of them, and they will leave Lubljana in a few days. But they don't want to go to Milan right away."
"Why that?" his mother asked. Rudolf said with a sigh:" They still believe that the men will come back soon from the prisoners' camps. That is the reason why they want to stay in the area for a while. They will go to Portoroz and I will wait for them there. It is close to Trieste, so that I won't miss anybody".

Cecilia got quite excited:" What a wonderful idea! Portoroz is such a beautiful seaside resort, especially in autumn. We should go there as well. Who knows, we might even find friends from Zagreb..." Mavro interrupted her:" If the Italians allow us to go there – well, then let us do it. But we will register first."
That settled the issue.

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Rudolf took the train to Trieste the following. He left his suitcase at the luggage office of the main station, avoided the police precincts and

arranged the poste restante address they had agreed upon. Then he started a leisurely visit of old Trieste, the colorful harbor, the impressive palaces or the big shipping and insurance companies, the Roman ruins. Only a few hours afterwards he picked up his belongings at the station and was on his way to Portoroz.

His mother had been right. The waters of the deep-blue Adriatic Sea were limpid and calm. A light swell touched the quiet beaches. The stately villas in their washed colors and the boarding houses with almost all the shutters drawn already exuded the peace typical for the after-season calm. The whole situation seemed unreal to Rudolf. Here was a place in perfect tranquility, as if the last weeks and months had not existed!

Rudolf rented a room in an old boarding house, still open for tourists, and waited.

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Some days later his parents and aunt Ruzha arrived in Trieste. As Mavro had wanted it they dutifully registered with the “questura”, the local Police Headquarters. The inspector who had received them laughed incredulously when he realized what his visitors wanted from him. “Signor Kandel,” he exclaimed,” there are hundreds of foreign Jews in Trieste or in the area. Most of them have simply rented a room somewhere. And we don’t have the men to go out and look for them. Only a handful has registered with me. But if you insist…”
He opened a huge book, which was lying on his table, dipped an old penholder in an inkpot and registered them for confinement. But as a kind of reward for Mavro’s correctness this confinement was accompanied with quite favorable conditions. They were allowed to stay in the Trieste area for a couple of weeks. And they had the choice of a dozen places for their definite stay. The Kandels chose Arezzo, this beautiful city in the Tuscan mountains.

The Selingers arrived in Portoroz one week later. They moved into the same boarding house Rudolf was staying at. For some beautiful days they pushed all the troubles around them to the back of their minds. They enjoyed the seaside and its pleasures as if it had been a vacation in the good old times.

The beaches and the villas were bathed in the glow of the sunlight, which, even in autumn, remained warm. The palms and the cypresses were as shady as ever and the few people on the beaches had that dreamy smile on their faces, which you may find in seaside resorts all over the world.

Cecilia and Mavro joined them for a last visit before they had to move to Arezzo. The Kandels were tense but astonishingly confident. " The Italians will not let us down," Mavro explained. "As I have said already they are civilized and tolerant people. There is no Ustasha here. And the Nazis are far away, anyhow. We will meet again very soon".
Cecilia kissed her son good-bye and held him in a long embrace. For her, he had definitely become a grownup man by now. She didn't know any better than her husband, but she felt instinctively that they would not be separated just for a short while. And that feeling should prove to be absolutely correct.

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Those gorgeous days in Portoroz! Blanka will never forget them.

What she liked most were her long walks with Rudolf on the beaches and promenades. Hand in hand, eyes in eyes they enjoyed themselves and spoke about the future.
One evening Rudolf took her by surprise. " I will go to Milan the day after tomorrow," he told her. " Everybody is convinced by now that this is the best solution for all of us, even my parents. It is paradise here on the seaside, but it might turn out to be a fool's paradise. In a big city we can disappear and hide a lot easier."

Blanka didn't' like what she heard at all. "And what about me? You know quite well that my mother and my aunt are still waiting for their husbands."
" They won't come back that quickly. And I think your mother could always contact them via the Red Cross and send them a new address. Anyhow, I will go."
Blanka knew him quite well by now. He would not modify a decision once he had taken it. She seemed to take the situation lightly. But deep in her heart she cried.

Bertha and Zenka agreed to Rudolf's way of seeing things. They would stay for a while and then come to the capital of Lombardy as well.

When the two young lovers kissed good-bye, Rudolf promised her: " I will get you to Milan as soon as I can, darling!" And then he was gone quickly. He was afraid that he would start crying.

(Final Status before linguistic control: February,2002)

MILAN – A CITY WITH A BIG HEART

Getting accustomed to a new existence

On a beautiful and sunny morning in October 1941 Rudolf boarded the train to Milan. He had no problems with the perfunctory controls at the border. "Giovanni Kandeli" was allowed entrance into Italy.
The train arrived at Milan's main station with only a minor delay. What an impressive building with its gigantic halls and stairways – even bigger than Gare du Nord in Paris! But he had no time to waste on this piece of bombastic architecture. Young people with suitcases always looked a bit suspicious and he didn't want to be inspected.

Rudolf took a scrap of paper from the pockets of his coat. He read the indications a friend in Lubljana had given him: the tramline, the correct stop, and the address of somebody ready to help.
In a quiet street of an equally quiet northern suburb he found the house he was searching for. When he looked around, a window curtain was drawn aside across the street and a curious face was close to the glass, peering, an elderly woman's face with white hair. Rudolf shrugged. There is always one in any neighborhood to check on people. He laughed at the face and waved; the curtain fell again.
He had to ring three or four times. Only then did he hear slow and shuffling steps. An old man opened the creaking door. He blew his nose and begged Rudolf in.

The man presented himself as Signor Montana. Rudolf knew that he was an experienced middleman for Jews on the run. He was reputed to be absolutely reliable, to keep his mouth shut, to know a lot of people in town and to despise the "camicie nere" as the hard core Fascists had been named because they used to wear black shirts with their equally black uniform.
Fortunately Signor Montana knew about an almost perfect lodging for Rudolf, and it was immediately available.
The address was just around the corner. The flat to be had was tiny, but it was big enough for a young man without much luggage and limited expectations.

It formed a sub-tenancy of a much bigger apartment, which had been rented by the Blum's, a family of German Jews who had escaped to Milan just over a year ago. There was Mrs. Leonie Blum. Later on, Rudolf would affectionately call her "Mama Blum". Though she was very tough in all money matters, she was a very nice lady, indeed. And there was her daughter Sissi, a pretty girl of seventeen with deep black hair, equally dark eyes and an infectious smile.

The men, Sissi's father and her elder brother, had been sent to Ferramonti di Tarsia, which constituted the most important Italian internment camp for registered foreign Jewish males (and a few Italian Jews as well). It was called a "concentration camp" for official reasons, but even many inmates down there in Calabria were in some doubt if the Fascists hadn't only named it that way to please their Nazi cousins. Anyhow, living conditions in Ferramonti di Tarsia were hard but remained always human. There was no maltreatment; the internees were allowed to receive parcels and to visit ill members of their families. A large group of Jewish internees should be set free by the Italian authorities on September 4th, 1943, six weeks after Mussolini's downfall. The rest would be liberated by British troops one week later.

Well, as a "Slovene" Rudolf should have registered with the local police like all other non-Italians had to do. But, who knew, perhaps they would smell a rat or have some information about his real identity? In all likelihood that would have meant one of the camps for him as well. He had not the slightest intention to go to any internment whatsoever. And – hadn't he become "Giovanni Kandeli" anyhow? He decided not to show up at the police station.

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After a few days of "dolce far niente" Rudolf got restless. The considerable boredom of a Jew living in Milan illegally did not suit him at all. As he had found out rapidly, he could not enroll at Milan University. That would have been far too dangerous since "Slovenes" were not accepted, at least not without a further investigation of their past. Hanging around at the main station, on Cathedral Square or in one of the bars frequented by refugees – that definitely was not his cup of tea. He had had enough of that in Lubljana already.

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Work was the only way out. He wanted to earn his living in the most honest way possible. But how to achieve that? Slovenes were welcome as guests in Italy; yet, they were not allowed to take up a regular job. All in all "honest" – in 1941 and for someone like Rudolf - meant illicit work, done without all the necessary papers.

One evening he met Drago Vukovic in one of those small and inexpensive restaurants, where they were having pasta and a glass of Valpolicella wine at the same table.
They started talking and Rudolf found out that his table companion was a very rare species. Drago Vukovic originated from Serbia and was a stout Yugoslav Royalist. He had been working in Belgrade as a textiles salesman for Milanese companies. The country had collapsed, and since the German occupiers pursued all Royalists, even if they had business connections with their Italian allies, Drago had to flee immediately.

He escaped to Milan and was without a regular job by now. But he earned his living quite well, as he stated repeatedly.

Both got along well already during their first evening. And when Rudolf confessed that he had not found a proper job yet, Drago asked: "And why don't you join me? Together, we would be a very strong team!" "But what exactly is it that you are doing?" Rudolf inquired.
"Well, let me explain it to you," Drago smiled." I visit the concierges of all those hotels here in Milan where wealthy Slovenes or Croats use to lodge when they visit the city. As you may know most of them combine business with pleasure. And pleasure, this means primarily shopping. Milan's shops are famous all over the Mediterranean!"
"And then?" Rudolf asked somewhat puzzled. "And then," the Serb continued, "the concierges get a nice tip from me, the tourists ask the concierges for a guide, and the concierges recommend me."

"But what do you need me for in this business?" a still doubtful Rudolf continued to ask. Drago did not lose his patience: " I have listened to you, while you were talking to the waiters and to other guests. Your Italian is a lot better than mine. And if we are two, we can serve two groups of clients at a time or split a group according to their preferences."

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Rudolf accepted Drago's proposal. The next morning he was at their meeting point in front of the world famous "La Scala" opera house, and they started their tour of the hotels.

As it turned out, the guide business was a good one. They would lead the tourists to the luxury shops in Via Montenapoleone and other shopping streets or to the silk factories in Como, which was only one hour away by train.

The Croats and the Slovenes would look at and sometimes visit the antique shops with famous screen names on them, past the windows full of point lace and ancient silverware, small paintings and baroque furniture.
And the ostentatiously rich tourists, almost all of them profiteers of the "new heroic area", bought abundantly. Drago and Rudolf would get a nice commission from the shop- and factory-owners. Moreover they would hear about latest developments back home.
This scheme worked well and proved to be a source of regular income. Rudolf did not have to dig into his savings too often.

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Blanka and her family had come to Milan three weeks later. They had taken the normal train as well. Blanka does not know how her mother had procured the necessary transit papers. She is pretty sure, however, that there might have been some bribing and some forgeries.
But she does not know for sure. Her mother did not tell her. She simply was afraid that the young lady might be too talkative. Anyhow, they had not needed Rudolf's help.

For some days the Selingers moved into a small hotel close to the main station. This was fine for the moment, but it would be too expensive in the long run.
Fortunately, another guest of the hotel told them after a couple of days that two rooms were available for sublet in Via Alberto da Giussano. That was almost too good to be true! Via Alberto da Giussano was centrally located, not far away from a tram station, some markets and Corso Magenta, one of the major throughways of downtown Milan.
The Selingers rushed there. A tiny woman in her forties, dressed in the black gown of a widow, received them.

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Signora Gallia – that was her name – liked what she saw. She sublet the two rooms to Bertha, Zenka and Blanka right away.

Gallia turned out to be Swiss. Blanka remembers her as a very likeable and well-educated woman who fluently spoke all the three official languages of Switzerland: German, French and Italian. The widow was actively preparing the return to her homeland. Her husband had been Milanese; but he had died a few months ago. And now, nothing held her back in Italy anymore.
She promised Bertha that, once she would leave, the Selingers could rent the whole apartment. She should keep her promise a little later on.

Gallia's neighbors in the second apartment on the same floor were a German woman and her little daughter. This woman had been a singer and dancer in one of Milan's cabarets. From that period she still entertained excellent connections with influential Milanese dignitaries. Signora Gallia and the German woman knew of course perfectly well to whom the two rooms had been let. Fortunately, they did neither care nor talk about their new Jewish companions. In this way, the Selingers could stay in Via Alberto da Giussano for many months without being molested or interrogated.

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As soon as they had unpacked, Blanka looked into her notebook for Rudolf's address. She asked Signora Gallia for directions and went to see him. Rudolf was at home by chance.
What a moment when they met again! They flung themselves in each other's arms, laughed, cried and embraced. They were perfectly happy, and all the apprehensions accompanying their precarious situation were forgotten for a while.

However, Blanka and Rudolf had to adapt to a new way of life. And - had it not been for their young love – this way of life would have been rather dull, even with Rudolf's activities.
Life in exile is never exciting. You simply hang around and wait. You wait for the end of your emigration. You wait for a sudden police raid, which you had not heard of through the grapevine beforehand. You wait for a foolish politician far away who could change the rules and make life miserable for you. People you don't know call all the shots, and if you learn about it, well, than it is too late.

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You hang around – and you do it with a very limited number of people all the time. You hang around in your room, in a small coffee bar or in the anonymity of a park, a large square or an ugly suburb.
In exile, you are alive. But you are not happy at all.

At least, Rudolf had his work as a “Cicerone” for the tourists. The job was far from brilliant. Yet, it earned him some money and, equally important, reduced boredom.

Blanka was worse off. There was no school to go to and to prepare for the baccalaureate (she would have to wait for a long time until she saw a class-room again).
She had to do with the simple daily routines. She would queue up for butter, meat and other goodies of a wartime economy at one of the nearby shops. She would go to the fruit and vegetable market. She would help her mother with the apartment, once they had taken over completely from Signora Gallia after her departure. They would knit, embroider and chat during the long, wet, foggy and unpleasant winter evenings in Milan.

And there was Rudolf. Thank God.

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This unbelievable year of 1941 was concluded on a festive note. Rudolf’s sister Sophia and her husband Walter had finally gotten all the necessary documents, papers and tickets for Cuba. Since the Eisners were bound to board a ship in Lisbon, they had decided to pass through Milan on their way from the Trieste region.
Fortunately their letter reached Rudolf early enough for him to invite his parents as well. Another small miracle happened. The police in Arezzo gave them a travel permit for three days, citing “urgent family matters”.

“Lechaim!”
The apartment in Via Alberto da Giussano resounded with cheers and merry chats. Festive tableware and cutlery had been laid out on the table, which was lit by a sumptuous Hanukah chandelier with all the lights on.
Mavro raised a toast:” To Rudolf who has had such a wonderful idea! And to Blanka who has decorated the room so beautifully! And to Mrs. Selinger who has prepared such a fantastic dinner!”

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The he turned to his son and asked curiously: “But tell me, where does this chandelier come from?” Rudolf laughed. He was proud that everything had gone so well and that they were all together. “Very simple,” he said. I have borrowed it from one of the antique dealers I know. He will get it back tomorrow.”

Though it was a little too late calendar-wise Rudolf had asked Blanka’s mother to organize a Hannukah – evening at her apartment. Bertha was afraid to host such “ a large group of Jewish people”, but she conceded. Blanka had found some candles in the market, good wine and excellent pasta were still available everywhere.
Bertha, Cecilia and Zenka remembered some old Hannukah – songs from their respective childhoods. It was the first time that they were sung with Rudolf, Blanka and young Otto present. Blanka remembered the melodies so that she was at least able to hum them.
Later on in the evening they invited the German lady next door, who had lent them tableware and cutlery. The neighbor accepted readily. She brought with her two bottles of an excellent Barolo and some old German songs. This time it was for her to sing and for the other women to hum. The comforting light of the candles and the joyful atmosphere made them forget all their problems for some hours.

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Sophia and Walter Eisner left the next morning. They should not reach Cuba but be detoured to Mexico where they would stay. They would not meet their family again until after the war.
Upon departure, Walter Eisner took a marvelous Marvin watch from a small sample-bag. He gave it to Rudolf and said:” One day, you might need it”. Rudolf was moved and deeply grateful.
Mavro and Cecilia stayed for one day longer. Rudolf left his business for the day although there were many tourists in town to celebrate New Year’s Eve. He showed them some of the interesting places in Milan: the Cathedral with its huge square, the galleries, the “La Scala” opera house, the art collections of the Brera – and some shops, of course.
In the darkness of the next morning he accompanied his parents to the train. It was the first day of the New Year, dull and dark, foggy and wet. All exuberance of the last days had gone and been replaced by an apprehension they knew only too well.
Rudolf promised them that he would come to Arezzo as soon as possible.

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Nobody cried. They said good-bye; Mavro and Cecilia mounted their car, a last silent waving, and then the train left the station in a huge white cloud. They were gone.

1942

Germany
The systematic extermination of the European Jewry is decided at the „Wannsee Conference", held in Berlin in January. In May, the German Jews are forbidden to hold domestic animals. The "Kreisauer Kreis", one of the germ cells of the German resistance movement, gathers for the first time. Hitler orders the immediate deportation of all gypsies living in the country.
German troops reach the Stalingrad defense lines in September. In November, several Soviet armies encircle them. That same month, Germany occupies Vichy France.

Italy
In June, Mussolini meets Hitler in Feltre in June, their last meeting in Italy before Mussolini's overthrow. Major cities are bombed repeatedly by the Allied air forces. In November, Italian troops occupy Corsica.

Croatia
The system of concentration camps is completed. Whereas Loborgrad, Djakovo and Tenji serve as transition camps prior to the final deportation to Auschwitz and other extermination camps, Jasenovac will remain "operational" until 1945.Tens of thousands of Jews, Serbs, Gypsies and other minorities will be killed there.

The Jewish People
In February, the refugee ship "Struma" hits a mine in the Black Sea and sinks. 400 Jewish passengers die. The deportation of 110.000 Romanian Jews begins. The extermination camps of Belzec (March), Sobibor (May) and Treblinka (July) are erected. In July 300.000 Jews from the Warsaw ghetto are deported after heroic resistance. The deportation of Jews from France and Belgium starts during the summer months.
In May, the "Biltmore Conference" of important Zionists led by David Ben Gurion passes a resolution asking for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

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The old daredevil is alive again

Around mid-January Rudolf was alarmed when he discovered that his transit permit would expire in a few weeks.
He would be in great danger without a valid document. Should somebody ask for his passport he would be arrested on the spot. And he would not have the choice of his place of interment.
Something had to be done, and quickly! The only logical solution coming to his mind was to travel to Lubljana and ask for an extension.

When he told Blanka about his intentions she was quite appalled. "Rudolf, don't do it!" she implored him. "Slovenia has become a dangerous place. The countryside is full of partisan activity by now; they might attack your train and get you. And your only Slovenian document is a certificate of baptism. I do not want to lose you. Stay in Milan, please!"

Rudolf understood her anxieties only too well. He did not consider the partisan threat a serious one. However, the persecution of Jews in Italy as well as in Slovenia had become somewhat more serious in the last months. "Persecution" – well, everything in the world is relative. There were enough loopholes left. But he would have to leave his Milanese foxhole and expose himself. That constituted a risk. And Blanka was right: a certificate of baptism would not carry him very far.

On the other hand – where was the alternative? What if he would be caught without a valid permit? In this case he even risked to be sent back to Zagreb in a sealed train compartment. To be delivered to the murderous Ustasha was certainly not enticing perspective. No, he would have to go to Lubljana!

"Calm down, my love," he tried to console Blanka as best as he could. "I will have to run a risk all right. But it is a calculated one!" He explained all his reasons and assured her that he had prepared everything quite well. Blanka understood in the end, but she did so with a lot of anxiety and a cramp in her heart.
What she did not know was that not everything was as well prepared as Rudolf had pretended. There remained a simple but difficult obstacle: He had to find a convincing reason why he wanted to stay in Italy at all!

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Rudolf found a solution. During the guided tours through the textile shops and factories of Milan he had made the acquaintance of two executives – one German, one Swiss – of the well-known Kruse Textiles Company. He visited the two gentlemen and offered them to become their sales representative for Slovenia - knowing that they had tried to find one for some time already.

The two executives agreed to give it a try in spite of his apparent youth and lack of experience. They provided Rudolf with two sample-bags and, infinitely more important, with the necessary company credentials. Since he could show a regular job now, he could even hope for a generous extension of his transit permit.

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On the eve of his departure he met a Jewish couple in one of the customary meeting-places. He used to play chess with the man and knew him quite well.
" We will not be able to play for a while," he announced. " I will go to Lubljana on business. And I will have my transit permit renewed."
The couple stared at each other. The woman encouraged her husband to speak. "This might be a very important information for us," the latter remarked. "We have come from Slovenia as well. Our 'lasciapassari' have become invalid already a few weeks ago. Do you think that you could get us an extension up there?"
Rudolf shook his head. "You are asking too much ," he answered. "It will be already rather risky for me to try it on mine." But the man insisted: "Why don't you give it a try? Even if you don't succeed we are not worse off than we are now."

Rudolf still reacted evasively. He knew that these people didn't have any job at all. How could he get the necessary official stamps for them back in Slovenia?
On the other hand he wanted to be helpful to others who endured the same miserable life as he did.
Finally he gave in, nodded and said: "Well, I will see what I can do. Be at the main station tomorrow morning at eleven with a certified copy of your transit permits. However," he added, " I might need some money to 'convince' the right people over there".

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“No problem,” the couple told him. They were visibly grateful. “ We will give you enough money to cover all your expenses,” the woman said. Her husband added:” And a commission on top of it”.

The couple was at the train station, and it was there in time. Rudolf collected the copied documents and the money required. He grabbed his sample-bags and a small suitcase and boarded the train.
The trip was eventless, and Rudolf slept for most of the time, interrupted only by a frugal lunch in the buffet car.
When he entered Slovenia the border-guard asked for his documents, looked at them and said: “Welcome back, Mr. Kandeli!” He did so with a smile, which seemed somewhat enigmatic to Rudolf.
Don’t see spooks! he said to himself, and right – he arrived in Lubljana the same evening albeit with a slight tickling in his stomach.

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After having checked in at a downtown hotel he called his old friend Cesare who was still awake. Another strike of luck! Cesare continued to work at the Police Headquarters. He agreed to meet Rudolf for an early espresso coffee the next morning.
When Rudolf had explained his situation and his plans, Cesare laughed. “You still are the same old adventurer,” he said. “Well, let me do the paperwork. There shouldn’t be any problems with the extension of your permit. You seem to work for a respectable company. As far as the other couple is concerned, “ he added snapping his fingers in a well-known gesture,“ I might need a little help from my friends”. Rudolf sighed with relief and assured him that this wouldn’t be any problem.

They stayed for another coffee and started to talk about the general situation. Compared to the upbeat mood he had shown earlier Cesare seemed to be very gloomy. “ You know,” he said in a muffled voice,” we are slowly losing control of the situation on the Balkans and elsewhere. Mussolini is a lunatic and his advisers are lousy. We are losing battle after battle. Our cities are bombed. ‘Your’ partisans are getting bolder by the day. And both the Ustasha and the Germans are real pigs”.

He told Rudolf about the horrible findings the Italians had made when they found the Ustasha-run concentration camps of Jadovno and Pag Island in neighboring Croatia.

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They had discovered many people close to death. They had found mutilated corpses with the indelible signs of horrible torture.

"Since then everybody, be it in our army or in the police," he explained, "is convinced that we should not deliver a single Jew to those butchers although they keep asking us all the time. Everybody agrees on that, with the exception of a small gang of fanatics.
And believe me, the bloody Nazis are behind all this. They don't show, letting the Ustasha do the slaughtering. But they are the real masters in the whole area. They are exerting a mounting pressure on Mussolini to deliver your people to deportation and extermination.
So, my dear friend," he said while finishing his espresso," be very careful. As I see it, the worst is still to come. But let me do my job now." He smiled again and left.

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Rudolf left the hotel as well and walked over to the local branch of the old Wiener Bankverein. He knew a manager there, whom he had met together with his father during his previous stay in Lubljana. This man had been transferred from Zagreb, where he had worked with Mavro. Old loyalties die hard. The manager had promised all the help he could muster in a case of real need.

"Now, what can I do for you, Mister Kandel?"
The two men had enjoyed a brief business luncheon in a somewhat hidden restaurant, and the bank manager wanted to come to the heart of the matter.
Rudolf explained the real reasons for his visit to Lubljana. He told him frankly that the textile job just served as a pretext, hopefully helping him to get an extension of his transit permit.
"I want to go back to Milan as soon as possible," he said. "And that is why I don't have the time to sell the merchandise given to me by the Kruse Company. Do you think that you could find a local salesman among the bank's customers to do the job for me – a good commission included? And for all practical purposes: My name is Kandeli by now".

The manager hesitated for a while, but in the end he nodded. He knew someone who might step in. "Call me at my office tomorrow morning," he announced. And then he took an envelope out of his breast pocket.

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“Here is some money for your family. I owe it to the wonderful memories of the times when your father and I worked together”.
Rudolf thanked him wholeheartedly. The two men shook hands and left the restaurant in opposite directions. There was no reason to be seen together unnecessarily.

Everything was settled the next day. Upon calling the bank the manager told him that the local salesperson was already on his way. Ten minutes later the man showed up at Rudolf’s hotel.
They agreed that he would sell the merchandise in Slovenia, deduce his commission and send a cheque to Milan (which he duly did).
And then Cesare arrived in the lobby as well. He had obtained all the necessary extensions – another six months for the Jewish couple and one year for Rudolf!

Again, he didn’t want to take any money. Rudolf grinned: “Do you remember the nice shoes I bought you last year? Well, I think that your wife needs a new pair as well!” The police officer accepted and said:
“ Let us hope that it does not become a habit between us. Please come and see me in Umbria as soon as this madness is over”.
They embraced and said good-bye. Rudolf should never make it to Umbria after the war. But Cesare visited him in Zagreb in the Fifties. Rudolf does not remember how the Italian had got his address.

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When he had returned to Milan everybody was happy:
The Jewish couple because they had the badly needed extension of their transit permits. The managers at the Kruse Company because their merchandise had been sold at a good profit. When they asked Rudolf to continue in this job he had to refuse the offer. He cited the need to stay close to his family, since he couldn’t lay open his real reasons.
Rudolf was happy as well. Everything had worked out fine and he even had made some money in the process. And Blanka was happy. Her beloved Rudolf had come back unscathed. And he bought her three pairs of silk stockings, which were the ultimate luxury of the day.

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Boredom and insolence

After this adventure Blanka and Rudolf resumed their day-to-day life.
It still consisted mainly of boredom. Even if it was elevated to an art form: It still was boredom. There were no goals to be pursued in earnest. The goals all boiled down to a simple one: Survival!
Everything was provisional. Every part of one's shaky framework could change within a matter of hours. There was no regular education for the children and no regular work for the grown-ups.

And many of the refugees tried very hard to work – not only for the money but to fight boredom as well.
Rudolf had resumed his job as a guide. However, the number of Croatian and Slovenian tourists visiting Milan went down – a sure sign of the gradual deterioration In Hitler's and Mussolini's empires.

Other Jews had developed a considerable amount of energy and fantasy in developing their activities as well.
For instance, Blanka remembers the visit of a student in mathematics who came to her apartment together with Rudolf. This young man had discovered that many postage stamps on the letters and parcels were not marked by the post office. They could be removed and sold again with a rebate.
The student decided to do business in this field. He visited the philatelic shops and the stamp-collectors regularly and bought envelopes with stamps on them at a very low price. And now he needed someone who was prepared to help him remove the non-canceled stamps from those envelopes.

Blanka, when asked if she would be willing to do it, laughed at first. What a promising job this was! But then she accepted. There was at least something she could do.
And it was a lot better than to assist that other young man who had discovered that one could prolong the lifespan of exhausted batteries by adding small amounts of sulphuric acid. He developed a scarcely known market-niche: The one for “used batteries”.

Thank God there was Rudolf, Blanka thought! And in his free time he would not share the life of so many men who were spending their days in the cafés playing cards or chess. He would take her out for window-shopping or a stroll through the Galleria del Duomo.
If his day with the tourists had been good he would bring her a nice little present. They would go to the famous “Caffè Motta” for an ice cream or to a cinema close by.

At rare occasions Rudolf invited Blanka even to the “La Scala” opera house. She remembers the great soprano Renata Tebaldi and the equally great tenor Beniamino Gigli quite vividly.
They didn’t know if there still was an active synagogue in Milan at that time. Anyhow, they would not have visited it. Their religious senses were not too developed, as we already know. Furthermore, the visit of someone who did not belong to the regular community would have been much too risky. There was police around all the time.

All in all – and under the dire circumstances of 1942 – Blanka and Rudolf were sitting in a clover. If only they could have spent their time together as long as they wanted!
But there was no place at all at the Selingers, especially since aunt Zenka had unofficially resumed her tailoring in one of the rooms and was winning her first clients. Rudolf’s room was very small. And he was jealously “guarded” by “Mama Blum” and her daughter Sissi.

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And then, on a hot and hazy afternoon in early summer, a man from Lubljana told Rudolf that the Padova University would accept Slovenes and Croats in its Faculty of Medicine.
Rudolf was thrilled. Finally there was a chance to resume the studies, which he had to interrupt so brusquely in Zagreb! His days would be filled in a meaningful way again.

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He took a train to Padova. The haze had become fog, so typical for the River Po plain. The city was filled with it, and the old university gained an additional aura of fame and venerability in such weather.
Rudolf went to the offices of the medical faculty. He told the secretary that he was a Slovene living in Milan, that he had studied medicine before and that he wanted to be admitted.
The young girl at the reception asked him where he had studied before and Rudolf answered:" In Zagreb." She asked him: " And your student's papers are all there?" "Yes, Signorina," Rudolf replied. "And what is your name, please?" she inquired politely.

A trap had sprung!

His adopted name was of no use. Nobody would know a Giovanni Kandeli back home in Croatia. But to give away his real name? Well, since the young lady had not asked for his transit permit or any other document Rudolf did it and left.
On his way back to Milan the enormous stupidity with which he had acted dawned upon him. The Ustasha people would know that he was still alive and well. And they would react.
He decided to discontinue his dream of being a student again. No way of pursuing this path! When he told the story upon his return a baffled Blanka called him an "idiot". And she was right.

As Rudolf found out later on, the University of Padova wrote to the University of Zagreb. They asked about documents related to the studies of a certain Rudolf Kandel. The Ustasha administration in Zagreb did not feel in a hurry. It reacted only after the summer recess.
The Croats sent a letter to their Italian colleagues asking for Rudolf's immediate arrest and transfer to Croatia. They marked him as a "dangerous and leftist Jew".
The people at Padova University didn't know what to do with it. They sent this cable to the police in Milan. The officers there opened a new file under the name of "Rudolf Kandel". Such a name was not yet to be found in any of the lists in Headquarters. Looking into the files, which were maintained in alphabetic order, they came upon a certain "Giovanni Kandeli". Could this be the same person? The police started a discrete inquiry.

-17-

One more narrow escape

An absolutely agitated Sissi Blum yelled over the phone: “Beware, Rudolf, beware! The police have been here some hours ago. They are looking for you as a dangerous Communist. They want to send you back to Croatia!”
It was an afternoon in late September. Rudolf’s day with the tourists had been a excellent one. A lady had bought a rather expensive piece of jewellery, and the commission for it was more than he normally earned in a fortnight. He had picked up Blanka at the apartment and wanted to invite the Blums to a good dinner.
And now that!

He was aghast. “What did you tell them?” he asked. “Well, nothing of course,” she reassured him. “But they have formally asked us to inform them when you will be back. My God, Mama and me are so scared!”
“In that case, we will have to delete the dinner I had planned for all of you. Please be so kind as to pack all my belongings. I will pick them up as soon as I can.” Rudolf put the receiver down and did some very quick thinking.

In the end, there was not much he could do. Most of all, he needed a place to hide. He went to one of the émigrés’ meeting places. One of his fellow Jews let him have a tiny room under the roof of his equally small apartment.
When this was settled, and protected by the dark of the night, he took his luggage from the Blums . Both ladies were very sad to see him go; but this was the best solution giving the fact that they were in great danger themselves.

Before Rudolf left, Mrs. Blum asked him: “ Shouldn’t you contact Alberto Garuffi?” “Why haven’t I thought about that earlier? My God, that is exactly the right way to go!” Rudolf replied with the first smile of the evening. “Yes, I want to meet him as quickly as possible!”

He had been told about Alberto Garuffi before. This man was an Italian police officer from Calabria the Blums knew for quite a while.
Garuffi, a man in his late thirties, had helped them at various occasions already.

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And when he went home to see his family in Calabria, he would drop by at the internment camp at Ferramonti di Tarsia. He would visit Mr. Blum and his son and bring them the latest news from Milan as well as clothing and food.

An evening meeting was set up at the buffet of Milan's main railway station. Rudolf had arrived early, had positioned himself close to the entrance door and paid his pot of tea right away. He had been given a description, and when he saw entering a small guy with his gray hair closely cropped and a large aquiline nose he knew that he had found his man. Only then did he notice the folded newspaper und his left arm, the mutually agreed upon sign of recognition.
Rudolf got up, presented himself and led Alberto Garuffi to another table in a quiet corner of the hall.

The two men started talking. Their personal chemistry worked quickly, in spite of the difference in age between them. They became friends almost immediately. Rudolf remembers him as a "very charming and nice man" and adds:" He was a good example of what made most of the Italians different to the Germans or to the Croatians. He was not willing to accept that he should not help people who were innocent, just because they were Jews".
A couple of days later Rudolf introduced Alberto to Blanka. The Calabrian developed a considerable charm, Blanka was as irresistible as ever, and that sealed the new friendship.

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Garuffi did some astonishing things during the next weeks and months. He was working at the city's Police Headquarters and was regularly informed about imminent raids on Jews. As a consequence he could warn them in advance. Since most of these raids were taking place in Piazzale Duomo and its immediate surroundings it was easy to avoid them.
"Like a huge hide-and-seek game," Rudolf told me. "We couldn't afford to lose, and the police didn't really want to win."
Later on, he procured both Rudolf and Blanka with a kind of passport, which had been issued by the Italian Postal Services. Curiously enough such a document was valid beyond its immediate purpose needs much like a driver's license is today.

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Much more than that: Under a pretext he got access to Rudolf's 1942 file at the Police Headquarters. He took the papers and put them "inadvertently" into the 1932 drawers. Rudolf's file had disappeared for all practical purposes. In 1943, a British bomb hit the Headquarters and all the files were reduced to ashes anyhow.

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During the autumn months "normality" returned.
Rudolf continued his activities as a guide for Slovenes and Croats. He did not earn a lot. But it was roughly enough to save the rest of the money he had made with his trip to Lubljana.

The Selingers went on with their uneventful lives. What else could they do?
Aunt Zenka moved from the provisional tailoring atelier in their apartment and rented some rooms elsewhere. She was very good at her work and rich Milanese ladies started to order costumes just like the rich Zagreb ladies had done only a year ago.

In spite of the bombardments and other hardships there still was a lot of elegance to be admired in the streets of Milan. Some ladies were promenading their dresses in light colors with swinging skirts and lace embroideries around the neck. Others featured close-fitting costumes with high-heeled shoes.
The men would like suits with a waistcoat and wide, turned-up trousers. For the more dignified ones dark colors and golden pocket-watches on chains seemed to be compulsory. The shirts were white and high-collared, and the ties featured small and tightly bound knots.
Many adults wore hats in the streets, coming from Borsalino or other famous suppliers. And the ladies wore small hats even in the opera house or the theaters.

Otto, Blanka's brother, created the only real problem for her and her mother. He was eleven by now. Astonishingly enough, the Jewish immigrants of Milan had not set up an informal system of education, as they had done in so many other places.
There was no school whatsoever for Otto. His mother taught him the basics of reading, writing and mathematics – and that was it. As a consequence the boy spent his days in the streets,

which was a source of constant apprehension for his mother. Once again, Life had taken over from School as the great teacher.

All in all, however, life in Milan was still relatively close to normal. The Jewish refugees had found more or less secure hiding-places. They were able to stay in contact with each other and to move around quite freely.
There were regular contacts with the local Jewish community as well. Though the conditions of its existence had deteriorated, it was able to continue all its activities quite undisturbed. There was no open anti-Semitism whatsoever. The Fascists behaved in a very inconspicuous way in those days; even the hard-core “camicie nere” avoided attracting undue attention. There were very few mass rallies and there was no open misbehavior at all.
The capital of Lombardy showed her big heart to Rudolf and Blanka, to the Selingers and to many other Jews. And this certainly was something to be grateful for. Two thousand years of a deep-rooted civilization were not to be undone by some barbaric instincts.

Another small miracle at hand

During the years of war Milan was hit by air raids with an accelerating frequency. When the Allied squadrons approached Northern Italy, a general alarm was usually given throughout the area. There was not much more to be done. Italy did not dispose of any air defense system worth mentioning.
And in the houses there were no protective systems either. There was no fire-fighting or life-saving equipment. There were no shelters, just basements. The Milanese did not know at all if an air raid was aimed at their city. In many cases they did not even bother to go to the basement. And if they went they just sat it out. If their quarter was the target of an attack there was strictly nothing they could do. They were just sitting in the dark or by the light of a candle.
They were just waiting.

They would listen to the sound of the exploding bombs. And if those bombs hit a house or a factory near-by, their basement would tremble

and mortar would trickle into their nostrils, their ears and their eyes. When they heard the “all-clear” signal they would walk up to the surface again. They had survived once more.

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In late October, Rudolf visited Blanka at her apartment in Via Alberto da Giussano. They had dinner with Blanka’s mother and with Otto.
Rudolf enjoyed the food the Bertha had prepared for him. The vegetable soup was steaming hot and very spicy. And the beef was broiled to perfection. He smiled when Blanka proudly exclaimed: “I have done most of it!” “I am absolutely sure that you will be a first-class cook one day,” he agreed.
A large wedding party was going on at the floor below them. Its merry sounds added to the relaxed atmosphere.
Then, all of a sudden, the sirens started to wail!
Blanka looked at the wall watch. It was five minutes past ten o’clock. “Let us hurry down to the basement!“ Rudolf exclaimed. “Really, Rudolf?” Bertha was reluctant. She did not want to go. “I have witnessed too many false alarms lately. And what about the rest of our dinner? Why shouldn’t we enjoy our fruit salad and an espresso first?”
Rudolf insisted: “No, no, we will go right away. The dinner can wait”, he said in a firm voice. It sounded like an order, and Bertha was not accustomed to take orders, not even from her husband. A baffled Blanka looked at both of them. Would they start a dispute now?
To her great relief, Bertha gave in grudgingly. She had accepted reason and authority. They took their documents and a small suitcase with the valuables before going downstairs. This was routine procedure by now. They had done it several times before.

The apartment of the Selingers was located in a rather large building right on a corner of Via Alberto da Giussano. An imposing central part built of well cut stones in a light gray color and featuring a large entrance door was flanked by two wings, built mainly with red bricks.
Their apartment was located in the left wing. When they reached the door to the basement they found out to their amazement that it was locked. The janitor had gone out, most probably to a restaurant, and had taken all the keys with him! Somewhat disquieted they went up again, crossed the courtyard, rushed to the right wing of the house and stepped down the stairs over there.

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In the basement they found themselves with a dozen of other inhabitants. After some nervous joking a deep and anxious silence set in. Nobody wanted to talk any more, and only a baby girl cried briefly in the arms of her mother. It was the tense silence of helpless victims. Everybody who has been through an air raid will never forget it.

Somewhere up in the skies huge airplanes would approach like black shadows. What would be their target tonight? The silence was so dense that you cut have cut through it.
And then, only some minutes later, all hell broke loose! And the people in the basement knew: This time it was their quarter, which was the aim of the attack. The sound of the explosions became deafening. Their blast wiped out the candles and nobody mustered the force to rekindle them. Rudolf grasped Blanka's hands. They were as trembling as his own ones.
All around them were deafening noise, the horrified sighs of the adult and the crying of the baby. All around them were deep darkness and blind fear. It was pandemonium.

And then one of the high-explosive bombs hit their house.
The basement was shaken terribly. It swayed like a ship in a heavy storm – but it held! The old plaster, falling from the ceiling and the walls, covered them and filled the room with dense dust. Somebody shouted: "Take your shirts off and cover your mouth and your nose!" Everybody obeyed.
Blanka was afraid that they all might die from suffocation. Her eyes burned heavily, and there was dust everywhere, in her hair, her ears and between her teeth. Thank God, some air still entered the room through a small window close to the ceiling. The Selingers and Rudolf held each other tightly, and that was all they could do.

But then the sirens gave the "all clear" signal; the air raid was over. Everybody in the basement still was numb with shock. It took a few minutes until a woman lit the candles again. The people in the basement could barely see each other. The dust had not yet settled. And when it finally did, they looked at each other in stupefaction, until a dry voice said: "We are all looking as if we had fallen in a big pot filled with flour!" Somebody laughed and the shock subsided gradually.

Some Italian tenants and Rudolf tried to open the thick wooden door to the staircase.

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This proved rather difficult since a lot of debris was blocking it from the outside. But in the end they succeeded, and the whole group managed to make it up the stairs and into the open. Really - they looked like ghosts with plaster all over them and the eyes still widened by the terror they had gone through.

When they looked around the sight was like a new kick into the stomach again. The whole left wing had disappeared! Blanka looked up. She saw the moon, shining through some thin clouds. It was exactly there where her apartment had been only half an hour ago. The rooms had been cut right in the middle by the deadly blast. Blanka swears that she even saw the pots of their dinner on the cooking stove.
When the first rescue teams arrived on the scene, they found out to everybody's horror that the whole wedding party had been killed to the last participant as well as a few people on other floors.

The Selingers and Rudolf had miraculously survived but all their belongings were gone. The documents and the small suitcase was all that they had saved.
When the first shock over this loss had subsided Bertha and Blanka started to commiserate their fate. Where would they go now? Where would they find the bare necessities of life?

And then Rudolf started to chuckle. He chuckled, chuckled again and then he laughed out loud. The others thought that he was suffering from an attack of after-shock hysteria. They tried to calm him down.
"For Heaven's sake!" he exclaimed. "I am perfectly normal. The British have taken away your belongings. That is bad. They have taken many lives. That is horrible. But they have presented us with a big gift!"
"Come on, Rudolf," Bertha retorted. "You must be crazy. Where do you see a gift in this terrible destruction?"
Rudolf had regained his composure quickly when he was reminded of the dead still lying under the debris. He said in a quiet voice: "Well, we have been bombed; this means that you now have the status of a "homeless person". And the Italian authorities have to assume that we have lost all our documents in the air raid. This means that we can ask for real papers – perhaps even passports!"

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And that is precisely what happened some days afterwards. The Selingers and Rudolf presented themselves at the Questura, the local police headquarters.

A friendly police officer congratulated them for their survival and commiserated them for the loss of their belongings.
Yes – there would be new papers. The exact nature of these documents is not clear. Blanka thinks that the Italian Red Cross might have handed them out. When the police officer asked the necessary details he remarked that his visitors' Italian was good, but not perfect.
No problem for Rudolf. He explained that they were Slovenes who had come to Milan roughly a year ago. That settled the matter. And with those papers they could travel throughout Italy. Barring further inquiries they would be relatively safe.

(Final Status before linguistic control: February,2002)

THE BEGINNING OF THE ODYSSEY – AND A STRANGE MARRIAGE

A winter in the Mountains

Rudolf and Blanka were glad that they had obtained at least some kind of Italian papers. These precious documents did not solve all their problems, however.
Above all – they needed a place to stay and to sleep. The Selingers had to move into the apartment of Jewish friends from Croatia. They knew that this could be only a very short-term solution. Five people were crammed into two rooms and a kitchen. Rudolf's room under the roof was so small that he could not lodge anybody else, not even young Otto. They had bought the most necessary things: clothing, toilet articles and other small items. The only objects of value they had saved were the money, the jewels and Bertha's fur coat with the gold coins sewn into it. But the lingering question remained: What next? Where to go? Where to feel reasonably secure from the air raids?

Help came in the person of Signor Falconi. This good-looking Milanese gentleman with his well-trimmed black moustache was visiting the German woman next door on a regular basis. Blanka recalls the stormy and passionate character of this relationship. He probably was very jealous of his part time companion and suspicious of her former career as a dancer in nightclubs. And he was an absolute hypocrite, of course. Rudolf saw him once while he was guiding some tourists to an old hotel, where Giuseppe Verdi had lived for some time.
There came Signor Falconi! He was an epitome of dignity – with his winter Loden, his dark green felt hat, with his wife in her precious fur coat and her proud smile. And he even carried her parcels. When he saw Rudolf on the other side of the street he looked away.

Nobody knew exactly what he did for a living. Apparently he was a dealer in many items, "both licit and illicit", as Rudolf recalls. But – who cared about such details in times of war and distress?

This Signor Falconi had inherited an old farmhouse in the beautiful mountains above Bergamo, a city not too far away from Milan. He used to go there for short holidays, but during the warm and sunny months of the year only.
Since the apartment of the German woman had been destroyed as well in the air raid (luckily, she and her daughter had been out at that time) Falconi had suggested moving up there. Apparently, the lady had refused to go to the countryside in wintertime. It was much too cold and too lonely for her taste. She rented an apartment quite close to the previous one and let Bertha know her new address. She had invited her for coffee and chatted about the “hut in the snow, where this brute wants to hide me.”

Anyhow, Falconi came to see Rudolf whose address he knew. He played the cool, successful businessman, looking at Rudolf without nodding, as if he were looking at a painting or a photograph.
But then he asked what had happened to the Selingers. That was quite an unnecessary question, since his German companion would have told him already. And Rudolf knew that Signor Falconi was up to something. Rudolf explained their difficult situation, and the Italian exclaimed in a fake spontaneity: ”Why don’t they use my farmhouse up in the mountains? I will not need it for a couple of weeks at least. It is rather chilly up there, but it is quiet and safe!”

Rudolf knew that Falconi had come to offer his help, but hadn’t dared to show it right away. He thanked him wholeheartedly, being a little doubtful, however. Would the Selingers accept such an alternative - way out in the countryside, far away from Milan, high up in the Alps, in ice and snow?
He asked Falconi for his telephone number and a little patience.

When they discussed the matter opinions were split. But there was a common urge to leave Milan, at least for a while. The shock of the air raid still was sitting deeply. And since there was no other short-term solution everybody accepted Mr. Falconi’s proposal. Rudolf called him and thanked him once again.

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He shaved and showered and dressed. He got his coat out and went downstairs. When he looked out of the front door, it was raining, a slanting gray rain like a curtain of cold crystal beads.

Milan weather! Rudolf thought. He buttoned up the collar of his coat, grabbed the suitcase and the briefcase and made it to the next tram stop. He met Bertha, Zenka, Otto and Blanka at the main station. They took the train to Bergamo. It was still raining. From there, an old and rattling bus brought them to the small village where Falconi's house was located. "Villa d'Ogna" said an old road sign close to the first houses. The rain had changed into snow, wet snow, but cold enough to make them shiver. Falconi's farmhouse was not too far away from the bus stop. But their feet were soaked through the shoes when they arrived there.
The wife of the farmer next door welcomed them and handed over the keys. When they had entered the house and opened the shutters Blanka and Rudolf were positively surprised. The house was spacious; it even had a separate room for Rudolf. It was suitably maintained, well furnished and equipped with a small library as well as a radio.

Everything was fine – but it was awfully cold up there! The cold of the early winter had entered the thick walls made of stone and would not go away before April or May. There was only one open fireplace for the whole house and a good stove in the kitchen.
Luckily there was a lot of dry firewood stored in a stable next door. Otto hauled some of it into the main room and Rudolf lit a nice fire. When this was done, Bertha and Blanka distributed all the available blankets, covers and pillows around the room. "This must do for tonight!" they announced.
Later on, Zenka went to prepare a simple noodle soup. That was all they had for dinner. But it was warm – and that was paramount under the circumstances. When the bedclothes had recovered from the damp cold of the trunk where they had been stored it was time to sleep. During the night Rudolf got up once or twice and put some more wood on the glowing fire.

The snow clouds had passed during the night, and a brilliant sun was coming over the mountains when they opened the shutters again the next morning. They all liked very much what they saw: rolling hills, a lot of snow on the higher mountains, a deep blue sky and absolute peace surrounding them.

It could have been like a holiday at a winter resort - if it hadn't been for the cold!
" We will have to do something about it immediately!" Rudolf announced. "If the farmers know how to keep it warm inside their houses we can do it as well!"

He went to see the farmer next door and asked him how he and his family survived the winter seasons. The farmer smiled and accompanied Rudolf to Falconi's house. "I will show you, my friend," he said in his melodious Bergamasque dialect. From under the staircase leading to the storage room he drew a couple of odd-looking objects: Earthenware pots, hanging in oval racks of wood.
"This will help you," he said. " But what is it?" Rudolf asked somewhat incredulously. "We call it 'prete'," the farmer replied. "You put the embers of the fireplace into the pot. Then you hang the pot into the racks. But carefully, please! Then you place the whole thing under the blankets of your beds. Believe me, the prete will warm your bedclothes very comfortably before you go to sleep. Besides, during the day you can use them to warm your fingers".
The farmer was right, of course. He knew by his lifelong experience. Falconi's "guests" got used to these devices, which were an ingenious application of the chafing-dish principle. And they laughed about their name. "Prete" is Italian for "priest". Well, perhaps some nuns had found this fitting name a long time ago. Or perhaps the farmers had invented it while joking about the vicissitudes of clerical life.

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In spite of the peaceful scenery there remained urgent matters to be addressed.
That is why, as soon as they had settled and done some shopping in the village store, Blanka's mother asked the rest of the family to go back to Milan and to visit the ruins of the house.
"They will dig up the debris to recover the dead. And then they will look for valuable remains as well." This was correct since those were the customary proceedings after bombs had destroyed a house. Bertha and Rudolf traveled to Milan early next morning. Zenka, Blanka and Otto stayed behind.

When the two arrived at Via Alberto da Giussano the dead had already been brought to the morgue. Nobody had survived in the wreckage of the left wing where the Selingers had lived. The clearing team was searching the ruins now. They worked with painstaking care, "like a team of archaeologists", as Rudolf recalls. During the first day nothing was found, which had belonged to the Selingers.
The team stopped working at around five o'clock when it was getting too dark to continue. Bertha and Rudolf caught the last bus to Villa d'Ogna. And a short night was waiting for them because they had to take the first car in the morning again to make it to Milan in time.

On this second day the clearing team was luckier. To start with they found a gramophone, which Rudolf had given to Blanka just a few weeks ago. The record player was almost intact! It had fallen under a cupboard that had protected it. Rudolf decided to take it back to the mountains even though they had no records at all up there. Well, at least it could be exchanged against a more practical item later on.
And then - and even more valuable – the clearing team found a box with a few pairs of new silk stockings, belonging to Blanka. Everything else was destroyed irrecoverably.

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During the next weeks it was a quiet life up there in the Bergamasque Mountains. Rudolf would go to Milan from time to time in order to earn some money as a guide and to do some shopping, but the rest of the group did not move.
They had found several worn-out boots in the house. They enabled them to have long walks in the hills. They kept the farmhouse in good shape and chatted with the few neighbors during daytime. The long evenings were spent playing card-games and reading the books in Signor Falconi's library.

December 6th, 1942, had arrived with some unusually warm weather. It was Blanka's eighteenth birthday.
She remembers: "Mama had prepared a good luncheon. She even had procured enough beef for a wonderful roast. And Rudolf surprised me with two very special birthday presents.
He offered me the two last roses of the year – in early December! Rudolf had seen them in the garden of a neighbor. The farmer's wife could not resist him and she gave them away.

And then he had brought a few records from Milan – opera overtures and arias. You wouldn't believe it, but after some cleaning and tapping the gramophone worked!"
The neighbor with the roses dropped by in the afternoon, congratulated the young woman and left a box with a dozen of fresh eggs. Now they had all the ingredients for a fabulous "Kaiserschmarrn", one of their preferred desserts back home in Zagreb. Bertha prepared it to perfection, and the dinner was as gorgeous as the luncheon had been.

Afterwards they were all sitting around the well-supplied fireplace. Everybody was content and grateful.
Yes, it was exile. It was a harsh, secluded and very simple life. But it was a life in dignity and with many signs of humaneness!
Little did Rudolf and the Selingers know what was going on around them. The bus driver once told him that some Jews were interned in villages further up the valley. Apparently the Italian authorities had gathered many hundreds of Jewish Croatian refugees in Split and other places on the Dalmatian coast and had dispersed them in confinement all over the Alpine regions.
The Selingers and Rudolf did not dare to enquire. Neither the bus driver nor anybody in their hamlet knew that they were Jews. They posed as Slovenes who had lost everything in an air raid. And that was what their papers said, wasn't it?

1943 (to the downfall of Mussolini)

Germany
Rommel's „Afrikakorps" evacuates Tripolis in January.
The commander of the Soviet forces in Stalingrad demands the capitulation of the German 6th army. Hitler is adamantly opposed to such a decision. In February, however, the German, Italian and Romanian troops have to capitulate. 90.000 soldiers and 24 generals are taken prisoner.
In Germany, high school pupils have to serve with the air defense units. Propaganda Minister Goebbels proclaims " total warfare ". The resistance group " Weisse Rose" is discovered and annihilated in Munich.

Hitler meets his "allies" Mussolini of Italy, Antonescu of Romania, Horthy of Hungary, Quisling of Norway and Pavelic of Croatia in April.
The Bergen-Belsen concentration camp is built.
The "axis" forces in Africa capitulate in May. 130.000 German and 120.000 Italian soldiers are taken prisoner.
In June Himmler orders the "liquidation" of all existing ghettos in Poland and the occupied parts of the Soviet Union.

Italy

The military crisis forces Mussolini to reshuffle both his government and his military leadership in January and February. Continued heavy bombardments on Italian cities and ports.
In April, the "Duce" tries to convince Hitler to conclude a "compromise peace" with the Soviet Union – to no avail. In June, the Allies conquer the islands of Pantelleria, Linosa and Lampedusa and with them the first Italian territories.
Antonescu of Romania tries to win Mussolini for a separate peace with the Western allies – in vain.
In July, the Allied Forces land on Sicily. The first air raid on the industrial outskirts of Rome takes place only a few days later.
On July 25th Mussolini is deposed and arrested. Field Marshal Badoglio forms a new government. King Vittorio Emanuele III. is made Supreme Commander of the Italian armed forces.

Croatia

Yugoslav partisans liberate Split on the Adriatic coast and attack Fiume. Shortly afterwards Split is retaken by German units. The partisans hold growing parts of rural Croatia.
In May, more than 2.000 Croatian Jews are deported from the Jasenovac concentration camp to the extermination camps in the East.

The Jewish People

In January, systematic deportations lead to a general uprising in the Warsaw ghetto. The ghettos of Cracow and L'vov are " liquidated " in March and in June.
The Warsaw uprising is quelled by strong SS – units in April and May. 70.000 Jews have been killed. After surrendering, 7.000 of those still surviving are killed on the spot. The others are deported to the extermination camps.

The systematic deportation of the Bulgarian, Macedonian and Greek Jews starts in March with the building of the ghetto in Thessalonica. In May, the last transports of Croatian Jews are sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

1943 began with Rudolf's twenty-third birthday on the 2nd of January. This time there was no big party. He had gone to Milan for a promising group of Croatian tourists and came home in the late hours of the evening.
The year started on a quiet note.

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Information and communication constitute some of the biggest problems with an exile in hiding. Letters had to be written to Zivko and Mirko who were spending a hard winter in their respective prisoners' camps. They had to be mailed via the Red Cross, and Rudolf brought those letters to its Milan office. He picked up a letter or two from the PoW's who apparently where not allowed to write on a regular basis.
No letter or parcel could be sent from the village. It was better not to give away one's address. Bertha and Zenka had noted it in one of the letters, hoping that they would not be detected.

There was no newspaper supply in the mountain villages around Bergamo. And when Rudolf brought a paper from Milan, most of the information was wrapped up in propaganda. They learned that the Germans and the Italians were having serious problems in Russia and in Africa. But no details were offered, only embellishment.

Thank God, there was the radio! It was the only regular means of information, the only link with outside world. The reception quality of Signor Falconi's outdated set was poor. Yet, Rudolf and Blanka were able to listen to Monte Ceneri, the Swiss long waves program broadcasted in Italian language. And, above all, there was the BBC with its program in German.
They would sit around the radio every evening, eagerly waiting for the hollow sound of the kettledrums, intonating the famous opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

It was from the BBC there that they learned about what had really happened in Stalingrad. The Italian papers did not report about this devastating defeat of the "Axis" and the Germans in particular until many days later. And even then important facts as the number of killed and imprisoned soldiers or the strategic implication of this defeat were hidden from the readers.
Stalingrad, where Italian soldiers had been killed and made prisoners as well, did not fit into the official propaganda of the "victors". But everybody knew about it – even the bus driver. All the Italians listened to Monte Ceneri radio. And if this program was as forbidden to be listened to as was BBC – who cared? In their hamlet there was not even a police outpost.

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As far as he was able to judge during his visits to Milan Rudolf noticed an important change in public opinion as well. The mood in the city had become one of general despair. There were too many air raids, the supply situation was slowly deteriorating, and there were too many mothers who had to deplore the death or the disappearing of their sons under arms.
Almost nobody believed in victory any more. If the citizens of Milan did not dare to descend into the streets to claim an end of the war, all those in these streets thought about it. And the Fascist dignitaries stayed behind close doors where many of them started their own schemes of reinsurance in all secrecy.

Blanka and Rudolf don't remember any of the BBC programs in particular. They concentrated on the news with their dramatic content. They were not yet fans of swing music, and the programs of classical music in the Italian radio were excellent.
But they may have listened to Lindley Fraser's famous reports who, in his personal message for the New Year, said the following on January 1st, 1943:
" The victory which Hitler so proudly proclaims is his victory over the Jews – helpless men, women and children, all over Europe, which his five hundred thousand thugs are deporting and torturing and killing just because they belong to the Jewish race".

For quite some time they had been informed about the existence of concentration camps in Germany and all over Nazi-occupied Europe.

They knew about the suffering of their Jewish brothers and sisters, they knew about German atrocities and had been witness themselves to the unimaginable bloodthirstiness of the Ustasha.
But they could not be aware of the infamous "Wannseekonferenz", with which the policies of the so-called "Final Solution" were initiated. They were not informed about the first systematic attempts to annihilate the European Jewry. They did not know about Auschwitz, Sobibor, Belcek or Treblinka.

Sure, the terror they had personally experienced, witnessed or heard about was bloody and gruesome. But it was the individual terror of criminals, many of which came from Croatia's lumpen class. They were spared terror's masked, bureaucratic anonymity. They did not perceive the cold and deadly system behind it. And, strange as it may seem, that helped to endure and to survive. It is a lot easier to muster one's hope if the threat to it carries a face – even if it is an evil one.

Marriage as the only way to have a life of one's own

Things changed by mid-February; the quiet life came to an end.

"I am really sorry, but I need my house for the end of the month."
Signor Falconi, who had come to the farmhouse on a surprise visit, felt clearly uncomfortable while sipping his tea.
Rudolf asked politely: "But can't you give us a few more weeks. We may need some time to find a good alternative." The Italian shook his head. He had explained that his German companion finally had had enough of the constant air raids. She was ready to move to the countryside with him and her daughter.
"Well, thank you very much for all you have done, Signor Falconi," Bertha interjected. "We will be out in a fortnight. At least I will be able to see some shops again." She tried to end the discussion on a cheerful note. But her taut face and her sad eyes gave her away. It was distress she felt and not relief.
Her host bluntly refused to accept any payment for the weeks during which they had enjoyed his hospitality. The only recompense he was willing to accept were the gramophone and the few records with it. Rudolf did not want to carry them around.

When the Italian had left they sat together. Plans had to be made quickly. They all knew: Only Milan offered an immediate solution. But even there it had become a lot more difficult to find shelter. Many apartments had been destroyed during the last months. Others were sealed since the owners had moved to the lakes or to the mountains in order to avoid the air raids and their dangerous consequences.

Rudolf left for Milan the next morning. He had to stay for a couple of days, going back to his tiny room under the roof. He had always kept it up; and in the meantime he had used it when his work did not allow him to catch a connection to Bergamo early enough in the evening.
He visited the already well-known cafés and bars around Main Station. He got a lot of advice – most of it rather pessimistic – and some addresses, which he contacted one by one.
In the end he had to knock at many doors until a solution was found. Finally, a Frenchman living in Milan was ready to accept the Selingers in his house, which was already filled with a whole group of émigrés. The apartment he had to let was very small. Otto would have to sleep on an old couch in the living room; Bertha, aunt Zenka and Blanka would have to accommodate in the only bedroom available.

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It had been snowing on the day of their arrival in the Bergamasque Mountains. And it was snowing again the day they left Villa d'Ogna. Deep clouds hid the higher hills and the mountaintops from sight. No way to say good-bye to them! In the bus they shared a small cake the helpful neighbor had baked for them when she had learned about their imminent departure.
The bus driver helped them to carry the luggage over the slippery street in front of Bergamo's railway station. Rain had started to mix with the snow of the night.
And it was raining in Milan as well. The capital of Lombardy can be very gray and ugly during the winter months, touching upon a strange kind of hostility. The refugees knew that the time ahead of them would be a lot rougher. They took their suitcases and proceeded onwards. A next chapter in the book of their odyssey waited to be opened.

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One evening in early March Rudolf invited Blanka to a modest dinner, offered by an equally modest restaurant in one of the suburbs.
During the last two weeks they had wanted to be together as much as possible, as all lovers do. But how to do it under these circumstances? They had hardly any privacy at all which added greatly to the other hardships of a forced exile.
An inexpensive dinner was among the only forms of distraction left for them.

When they had finished the compulsory pasta and a bottle of mineral water, Rudolf reached across the table and took Blanka's hands. Blanka looked at him with some astonishment. He looked composed and very resolved.
"Listen, my love, there is something I have wanted to tell you for quite a while already," he said. " We simply can't go on like this. The situation has become almost untenable. And what will happen if we have to move once more? It becomes more and more difficult to house the whole group!
Milan has become a very dangerous place with all those bombs. We should not try our luck too much".
"I know, I know," Blanka replied. She did not know where he was heading." But I don't see what we could change...." "Let me finish, please," he urged her. " There is still another, much more important point. I want to live with you!" He swallowed before adding:
" We should marry. This is the only way we could have a life of our own".

Blanka was completely set back.
She loved this young man and loved him very dearly. All her feelings told her to embrace him and to say, "Yes, let's do it!"
But reason told her otherwise. Marry now, so early? She was only eighteen years old and not even an adult person! What would become of her mother, her brother and her aunt? Well, and since all young ladies are a little vain when it comes to marriage she had to admit that a more formal approach would have been much more to her liking. She was about to argue, but then she whispered in an agitated voice: " Why can't you be careful, Rudolf! There is a big stain on your shirt!"

Rudolf laughed. He took his handkerchief, put some water on it, started to clean his shirt and said mockingly: "Well, darling, it is high time that we marry! You are already starting to mother me."

And then he wiped away all her arguments:" Blanka, we love each other. Isn't it only natural that we marry one day? And why shouldn't this day be very near? Why should we wait? It is another three years until you will be of age. Who knows what will happen until then? We might not even see that day!"
When Blanka finally asked: "Yes, but what about my family?" he knew that he was on the winning road.
"We will not leave them behind," he assured her. "The only thing I want to have is a place of our own. We will always live in the same spot or at least in very close vicinity of your people. I will look to that, I promise!"
She still argued for a little while. In the end, however, she came around the table and kissed him. Their marriage was sealed.

It was only while leaving the restaurant that the most obvious question came to her mind. "And how will we get married?" she asked. " We cannot simply go to the synagogue, can we?"
"Of course we can't", he answered with a cunning smile. "For almost everybody around us we are not Jews but Slovenes. This means that most of the people take us for Christians. This leads to a simple conclusion: We will have to marry in a church and according to the Catholic rite."
When she looked at him incredulously, he added: "Remember what I have told you once – let us play it by their silly rules! We want to survive and to live together. That is everything which counts."

Blanka still was stunned. She thought that he was just joking. But when she looked into his eyes she knew that Rudolf meant it very seriously. She started to chuckle and then to laugh: "Well, my love, all this is absolutely silly! But – let's do it. To use an old proverb: While in Milan do like the Milanese do!"
"However," she added, " you have to promise me one thing. When this whole ordeal is over, we will marry again. And then it will be in our good old way!" "Promised", Rudolf said with a broad grin. He tenderly took his arm around her shoulder. Together they strolled to the next tram stop.

As a next step they had to convince Bertha. Surprisingly, that turned out to be easier than they had thought. Blanka's mother had no illusions about the situation. She did not know, if and when she would see Zivko again. The rest of her family faced continuing uncertainty if not worse. Rudolf, whom she had started to like very much, would be an additional element of protection with all his wits.

And – the two young people were really in love with each other. Once a mother is convinced of that – how can she say "No"?

She sank all her remaining hesitations and gave her consent. This consent had to be a formal one because Blanka was not of age yet. That is why she gave it in written form as well.

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A lonely bell was ringing from the tower of SS. MM. Nabore e Felice, when the two newlyweds left the church on the 27th of March 1943. There were only a few people around them, but everybody seemed to be perfectly happy. Blanka was radiating, the women had wept off the tears, and the men were putting up a relaxed look.

Rudolf and Blanka had been married with the benediction of the Catholic Church, as the bell seemed to announce.

The wedding ceremony itself had to be arranged in a very special way. Monsieur Giolly, the owner of the apartment house Blanka was living in, had a brother, officiating as a Catholic priest at a nearby Parrish Church called SS. MM. Nabore e Felice.
This clergyman did not ask many questions though he may have suspected that it was a somewhat peculiar demand Blanka and Rudolf presented to him. The only thing he wanted to see was Bertha's written consent.
SS. MM. Nabore e Felice was not overcrowded for the event. Only the priest and his brother, the newlyweds, Bertha and their old friend Alfredo Garuffi were present. The latter served as witnesses to the marriage.

There were neither flower arrangements nor organ music, neither bridesmaids nor friends throwing rice. But it was a very joyful day nevertheless.
Rudolf and Blanka got a certificate of marriage, accompanied by a booklet – *ricordo di nozze* - filled with good advice for a Christian couple. There were no presents; but aunt Zenka had tailored a beautiful white suit for Blanka – complete with a small fur collar. Zenka herself stayed "home" to look after Otto during this day.

When they came down the steps in front of the church Rudolf announced unexpectedly:

"And now we will have a really festive marriage luncheon!"
The small group didn't believe their ears: he had reserved a table at "Savini", one of the finest restaurants in town! Since it was located in the famous "Galleria", very close to Piazza del Duomo, Bertha was a little scared. That was typical for Rudolf, the charming poseur!
What would happen if somebody recognized them by chance? But Rudolf was unmoved. "Don't worry", he assured everybody. "Our friend Alfredo with his festive uniform will serve as a protective shield for all of us".

And they had a peaceful and merry meal. Blanka still recalls the splendid *"Risotto alla Savini"* with its saffron-yellow color. There even was a bottle of good Barolo wine, much to the pleasure of Signor Garuffi.
When they presented themselves as a couple to their émigré friends and hinted at their story, everybody laughed and understood. Nobody had heard of such a ruse before. It seems that there have not been many examples of the kind in wartime Italy.

No honeymoon in Como

The absolutely cramped conditions they were living in did not allow for a wedding night. But the next day Rudolf took his wife on a short honeymoon trip to Como on its beautiful lake.
This trip should take an unexpected turn.

When they arrived in Como during the late morning hours they went to a good hotel and asked for a lake view room. Both of them were a little excited. Their first trip together!

The receptionist, an elderly gentleman dressed in the dignified jacket of a concierge, looked into a big book. Yes, he had a room available, and the windows opened on the lakeside promenade. He invited them to wait a little, however, since the rooms were not yet tidied up.
Why wouldn't they have a nice walk on the promenade in the meantime? Or would they prefer to have a coffee at the expense of the hotel? The receptionist asked them for their documents, as was the custom in all Italian hotels, and put the luggage away into a storeroom.

The two newlyweds preferred to take a stroll along the shores of Lago di Como. It was a splendid day and spring was in full progress. The legendary green waters of the lake were glittering in the sunshine.

The waiters in the bars had put the chairs out to the promenade, under the shadow of trees dressed in the unique light green of their early leaves. The white passenger-boats were already in service, and at a nearby bandstand the first concert of the season was announced for the afternoon. It was the perfect atmosphere for honeymooners, walking hand in hand and perfectly happy.

But when they came back to the hotel after luncheon the receptionist took them aside on the spot.
"The police are after you!" he said in an excited voice. "You have to leave immediately!" Rudolf was furious. "But why that! We are legitimate guests at your hotel!" "This may well be the case", the receptionist retorted. " But listen, young man: A police agent passes by here every day to check the documents of our new arrivals. He told me once that there are many illegal immigrants around. What he does: he compares the names of our guests with those in a big list he is carrying with him. And the agent hesitated when he saw your names. He left the documents in the hotel but ordered me to call him as soon as you are back."

Rudolf and Blanka couldn't make head or tail of it.
This time it was her who took the initiative. She politely thanked the receptionist and asked him for their documents and the luggage. When the Italian came back with their suitcase he said, barely disguising his sympathy:
"What a pity for you! The only thing I can do is to lie to the policeman. I will tell him that you had come back and took your luggage as well as your passports because you had to leave town unexpectedly.
I don't know who you are and why the police are after you. You are nice young people and definitely don't deserve such a treatment. Please, have a coffee on the house. There will be time for it. But then you must disappear!"

They accepted the invitation and sat down at the deserted bar, where the receptionist prepared two big espresso coffees for them. When he had left, a somewhat edgy Blanka said:

"I think I have an explanation now. Your Rudolf's Padova folly probably has produced such a result."
And a somewhat miserable Rudolf answered: "I am afraid that you are quite right. What an idiot I have been! But worse than that: Our papers will never fully protect us. But, "he added with a forced smile, "let us not spoil our day, please!"

And they didn't.
There were many houses close by with rooms to let. And when they found a particularly pretty one, the landlady didn't even ask for their papers. Apparently, many Italians wanted to make some money on the side and were prepared to bend the rules a little bit. After two days they don't want to talk about Rudolf and Blanka returned to Milan.

They were resolved to find a dwelling of their own, outside of the big city, if possible, and to lead the life of a couple as far as circumstances allowed it.

(Final Status before linguistic control: February,2002)

ODYSSEY CONTINUED

Desenzano del Garda

Two weeks had passed.
Rudolf had come to visit his wife. He found her sitting in the tiny kitchen of their apartment, together with her mother and aunt Zenka. Bertha knew that the young ones wanted to leave Milan and to have their own living space. She had been assured convincingly that she would not be left behind with her sister and her son.
And she had to agree: While it was nice to be rather anonymous in a big city, the air raids were driving everybody crazy and the apartment was much too small.

"I have found something nice for all of us!" Rudolf announced with his customary grin. Bertha put her cup back on the table and inquired without any sign of surprise: "Well, what do you have in mind?"
" I have heard about a nice little town called Desenzano del Garda, right on the shores of the homonymous lake, " Rudolf said. "The people on Lago di Garda depend on tourists, and the tourists don't come any more. I guess that we all should find some rooms quite easily. After what I have been told the town is beautiful and quiet. And there are no air raids up there."

"That sounds nice," Bertha remarked. "But will we be able to stay together or at least at close distance?" "Well, we'll see," Rudolf replied. " I have never been at the place. Just let us try our luck."
That settled one of the open questions. Yet, there remained another one, and Blanka brought it up. "And what will happen with your job here in Milan? The tourists will not wait for you!"
"Certainly not. But I can't have the cake and eat it," Rudolf said. "I will have to give it up. I have already talked to Drago Vukovic. He thinks that he can find a suitable successor." "And the money?" Blanka insisted. Rudolf remained calm. "For a while we will have to live on our savings. I have put a little sum on the side in the meantime. Who knows – perhaps there is something to do for me up there as well."

Bertha laughed: “Certainly not with the tourists, since they don’t go there anymore, as you have told us. However, it’s quite all right with me. If we put our money together we should be able to survive. Let’s move!”

They packed their suitcases once again during the next morning. It had become more or less routine by now. The Selingers and Rudolf, like so many other Jews in Italy, had to change places like a strange combination of the Flying Dutchman and Ahasver, the eternally traveling Jew. To be on the move constantly was very tiring, indeed. If you change places during an extended trip you always arrive somewhere. If you are a refugee you always leave, you always flee.
However, what else could they do?

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They took the train from Milan to Venice, which stopped in Desenzano. When they had left it and looked around from the station’s forecourt, Blanka couldn’t help exclaiming: “How beautiful!”
And Desenzano was a beautiful place, indeed. Located on the southern shore of Lago di Garda, the small city consisted mainly of an impressively looking, antique castle, an old town center, dozens of boarding houses and small, inconspicuous hotels. On top of it the Railway station and the central bus stop for all the towns and villages around the lake were very conveniently located. Everything looked quite promising.

Rudolf left the ladies at the bar of the station. He took Otto with him and went to the almost deserted Tourist Information Office. He asked for available rooms in a private home.
A sleepy woman looked at him without heightened interest. She knew that there were many addresses at hand. She knew them all. And she knew that her visitor knew it, too.
However, you have to play the game, don’t you? She looked into one of the folders on her table and said: “I have some phone calls to make. Could you come back in half an hour, please? I will see what I can for you”.
Rudolf decided to play the game and left. Half an hour later he came back with the whole family in his tow. The woman behind the counter looked at their worn suitcases with some curiosity. “We have been bombed in Milan”, Rudolf said laconically. That settled the matter. “ Those damned air raids,” remarked the lady. “But we have deserved it probably. Why did we have to side with the wrong allies? Besides. I have found something really nice for you.” She gave them an address.

And they found a rather big ground-floor apartment in an old villa, all overgrown with ivy.
The landlady, a stately widow, was only too happy to have some clients again.
She showed them a spacious conservatory. Large windows offered a great view on the blue waters of the lake and on the mountains. And there was a separate room for the young couple as well. The guests were allowed to use the kitchen – bathroom and all the sanitary installations were impeccable. Everything was offered at a modest price, a direct consequence of the low ebb in the tourist trade.

Blanka and Rudolf resumed the monotonous life of refugees. Yet, they were in love, wanted to be together – and if it was boredom it was boredom under the sun at least. They enjoyed their long walks along the promenades and a quiet afternoon drink in one of the coffee bars. They admired the way spring had conquered the pines and the olive trees, the gardens, the fields and the mountains. There were flowers everywhere; summer with its heat and its dust had not yet set in. The waters of the lake still were much too cold for a swim, but for a couple of Lire you could rent a small boat and paddle for a mile or two. Everything was nice and peaceful!
They could not know that only some months later Desenzano would be chosen to be the seat of the ill-famed “Inspectorate for Race”, the organization which tried to coordinate all the anti-Jewish measures of the so-called “Italian Social Republic”.

It was more than a pastime when Bertha introduced her daughter to the many obligations and endeavors of a dutiful housewife. To be frank - Blanka did not indulge in it. Cooking and preparing sweets, that was what she liked best. She recalls in particular that she learned how to prepare a “Palatschinken”, that famous Viennese pancake filled with apricot jam or other sweet delights. Yet, she always thought that her brother Otto was a lot better off. Otto, close to fourteen by now, went with the fishermen. He learned a lot about all the aspects of the trade and was very talented. He did not get any salary, of course. But when he came home, he always brought some delicious fish with him, which helped both to save money on food and have excellent meals.

The refugees from Milan had friendly and absolutely relaxed contacts with the people in Desenzano, just like refugee families who had come from other places. The landlady, the postman, the shop-owners and especially the fishermen on the lakeshore were always ready for a little chat. Nobody cared where they came from and who they really were.

The old tradition of Italian hospitability made itself felt very positively. And in tourist spots people are accustomed to strangers anyhow.
At times Rudolf and Blanka felt really at home in Desenzano.

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Nevertheless and really hard to explain: The old unrest was always there. The tranquility they were living in was a deceptive one. The rules of existence could change everyday. People they had known in Milan or in Lubljana might show up; spies and informers might be around at any time. “Mentally, our suitcases were always packed,” as Rudolf put it. The situation was slightly schizophrenic – and the ensuing stress created a permanent nervousness.

If there is an enemy out there and you can’t affront him in the open, you instinctively want to get as far away from him as is possible. Call it human instinct – but Rudolf, Blanka and the rest of the family felt insecure on the tranquil shores of Lago di Garda. Psychologically, the Austrian parts of Germany and Croatia were too close to their taste. They wanted to move to a different part of Italy.

That is why they decided to change their location again – only a few weeks after they had arrived at Desenzano.
Easier said than done. If they were to leave the wider Milan area they would need outside, professional help. Rudolf went to Milan for a couple of days to find out if such assistance could be found.

Rotter & Melamet

Rotter was a thin quiet man, about fifty years old, with smooth creamy gray hair, cool eyes and a rather distant manner. He wore a dark blue tie with red spots on it and these spots kept dancing in front of Rudolf’s eyes, while he was sitting across the table watching the man ho was bound to help them. When he had explained his request, Rotter got up and paced the office in small, elegant steps.
Then he regained his chair, picked up a pen and tickled the lobe of one ear with it. Rotter smiled, but he remained silent. He had the smile of a cat, but Rudolf liked cats….

He is putting up quite a show, he thought. But the show was not over yet. Rotter filled a pipe very slowly and reached for a packet of wax matches. He tried to light the pipe carefully, but he nearly burnt his fingers while doing so. Rudolf watched with approval. Pipe smokers were solid men.
Rotter lit his pipe again. It made him look thoughtful, even when he was not thinking.
He held the match in the air, still burning and watched the flame crawl close to his fingers. Then he blew it out softly, dropped it into the ashtray and said: "Well, Mr. Kandel, how did you find me and why do you think that I might be able to help you?"

Rudolf told him the story as he had heard it from some other émigrés.

Mr. Rotter and Mr. Melamet, or "Rotter & Melamet", as they were jokingly called by those émigrés, seemed to be a remarkable couple.
Mr. Rotter was a Slovene with many activities, some of them doubtful (Rudolf didn't tell his vis-à-vis this part of the story he had heard, of course). He was suspected of having contacts with both the German and Italian Secret Services. On the other hand he helped Jewish refugees as best as he could - and he did it for a fair remuneration. Was it his personal reinsurance policy or was it a case of a split personality? Nobody knew and nobody cared.

On the other hand, Mr. Melamet was a Jewish gentleman of unknown origin. He had set up a wholesale trading business in a lot of products. Somehow he had succeeded to pass as a non-Jewish citizen with all the documents needed. Rumor had it that Melamet enjoyed the status of an "Honorary Aryan", one of the more absurd, albeit profitable inventions of Ante Pavelic's Ustasha régime. But again – nobody knew and nobody cared.

"Rotter & Melamet" toured the whole country. They seemed to know everybody and everything. They knew where the situation was relatively calm. And they knew how to procure their clients with residence permits or other useful papers. The refugees had given Rudolf their address and that is why he was here – to find a relatively safe hiding-place for his family and for himself.

Rotter had listened in silence. Then he repeated the whole exercise: Get up – pace the office – sit down again – fill the pipe – get the matches – light the pipe – speak:
"Well. Mr. Kandel, it is a pity that my partner Melamet is not here today. He would have loved your story. But he is out on business…"

He had problems with his pipe, as almost all pipe smokers have. He had to light it again before he was able to continue:
" What you have heard, Mr. Kandel, is not wrong. But I don't want to go into any detail. As I see the situation, you and your family will need assistance for quite a while. I want to build a good relationship with you. That is why my first advice is free..."

My God! Rudolf thought. We are in the middle of war and persecution, and this man is talking as if he was a combination of a doctor and a salesman for fine wines!
He hid his astonishment and simply asked: " And what is your advice, Mr. Rotter?" Rotter smiled, but only a little, and said:
"I suggest that you and your people move to the Ligurian coast and to the Viareggio region in particular."

And then he gave his reasons.
The whole coastal zone around Viareggio was used by the Italian Navy and had been declared a kind of "Military Compound".
It was practically closed to normal tourism. The hotels and boarding houses were almost empty. This meant lots of rooms available at low prices. And he was well aware of the fact that money was slowly running out for the Selingers and for Rudolf as well. It was high time to cut costs and to look for some earnings.
What was even more important: To live right under the guns of the Italian Navy was the best choice available. Who would be suspicious of them in such a place?

Rudolf didn't smoke. If it had been otherwise he would have lit a cigarette or a pipe the same intricate way Rotter had done. He did some thinking and had to agree with the reasons given to him. It really was a tempting idea to move to the "Tuscan Riviera".
"Thank you very much, Mister Rotter," he said. "Your advice has been most valuable for me. And I think I will follow it."
"That's exactly what you should do, young man," the gray-haired Slovenian said. "And – you got my address. If ever you will need our help again, come to see my partner or myself. He smiled again, but only a little. "Even if the next advice will not come for free," he added.

A big deal and Lido di Camaiore

When Rudolf had returned to Desenzano and talked about his conversation with Rotter, Bertha agreed as well. She had heard about "Rotter&Melamet" already, and if this was their advice they would probably be quite right. They would go to the Ligurian coast.
However, Blanka and Rudolf decided to have a quiet look at the area before moving definitely. The next stay had to be for an extended period and not just for a couple of weeks.

They went to Milan very early in the morning. In Milan they boarded an express train to Rome and got off in Florence. There was no time at all to admire the marvels of Renaissance art! Another train brought them to Lucca where they had to spend the night.
They booked a room at a good hotel – without any problems this time. Apparently the police were not looking for Rudolf outside the Milan area.
Lucca – quite a place to be explored with its cathedral, the splendid church of S. Martino, the venerable figure of Christ, the wonderful tomb of Santa Ilaria and the pretty walk on the ancient ramparts. They had a late dinner at the hotel restaurant. Afterwards, Rudolf invited his wife to the small bar. In spite of the long journey they were not at all tired. Besides - even in times of war you could have a grappa or good vermouth!

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An elderly and very elegant gentleman was sitting next to them, enjoying his red wine. It had been rather warm during the day, but he was wearing a suit with a vest and a high-collared blue shirt, which went very well with his carefully combed white hair. He engaged Rudolf and Blanka in a lively conversation very soon, as it happens in bars all over the world.

The man presented himself as Signor Galani, "Commendatore Galani", as the barman addressed him respectfully. Galani told them that he was a widower. He lived in Lucca and liked to spend his evenings in this hotel bar whenever he did not have to entertain business partners or friends.
And when they talked about their respective activities, it turned out that he was the owner of Cuccerie Lucchesi, a well-known factory and trading center of wool and silk threads.
Galani invited them for another drink.

He must have been attracted to Blanka since he offered her an assortment of his produce right away. “Well, business is quite good,” he said. “Good threads are a rare product in the horrible times we live in. But,” he added with a big and convincing sigh, “ I could make much more money of I only were allowed to sell my product inside Italy!”

“How about that?“ Rudolf asked curiously. The businessman explained: “Well, you know, some small factories around Lucca and my own one manufacture for me – high quality thread only. But I have to appoint it exclusively for export to Germany or Slovenia or Hungary. Rome needs hard currency. But my clients in those countries don’t pay well. If I only could sell inside Italy, I would get much, much better prices”.

At that point of the conversation Rudolf had one of his crazier hunches.
“I have told you about my activities as a tourist guide in Milan,” he told the Italian. “I have been in good contact with a few textile factories, not only with the Kruse Company. I think they all need high quality thread. Perhaps I might help you with my contacts?”
“I doubt it. They might be afraid of anything illicit,” answered Galani. But then he looked at Blanka again and gave her his most charming smile. He had changed his mind apparently. “Well, we might try it nevertheless. Let us find out if and how we could do it.”

When the two men had dug well enough into the idea, Rudolf asked hopefully: “ If I could help you, what would be my commission?” “Ten percent,” Galani suggested. “Twenty percent,” was Rudolf’s counterproposal. He had learned the art of deal making in the meantime. Finally, they settled on fifteen percent, as was to be expected.
“Let me see what I can do for you,” Rudolf said. Signor Galani invited them to a last glass of red wine. When the waiter arrived, he opened the bottle, put three new glasses on the table and poured each one of them full to the brim. The Italian lifted one, sniffed it carefully, raised it and said: “ To good business and good friendship. Cheers!”
Rudolf and Blanka returned the toast and sipped at their glasses. Signor Galani poured his one down the throat. Blanka couldn’t help chuckling, since he did it with his little finger lifted.
In the end, Rudolf thanked the Italian for the kind invitation and left the bar with Blanka. Signor Galani left his address and waved them good-bye.

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The next morning they took a bus to visit Viareggio and adjacent Lido di Camaiore, the two famous seaside resorts to the west of to Lucca.
They were charmed immediately. Here was an area in which they would like to stay even for a long time! The Mediterranean Sea reminded them of their unforgettable vacations on the Adriatic coast, the tree-lined promenades with their buildings in "Liberty Style" were just gorgeous, and prices were very low, indeed.
They would move here!

Before they did it, Rudolf wanted to find out if he could do business with Commendatore Galani. When they had returned to Milan he did not go to the textile factories he knew. A better idea had come to him during the return trip. He went to see Signor Falconi, the man with many secretive types of business. He was staying in his farmhouse, together with his German companion and her daughter. Even in the Bergamasque Mountains Spring was having its full turn – a good period for a short vacation!
Rudolf told Falconi about Galani's problems. Signor Falconi remained pensive for a while. "Well," he finally said. "I think we can help your friend from Lucca. But if I go ahead, I won't tell anybody how I do it, neither you nor the 'Commendatore'. I will keep you informed afterwards".

What followed was an extraordinary deal. Galani sold half a train wagon full of high quality threads to Falconi, "for export only", as the forged papers said. In reality, Falconi sold the whole lot to clients in the Milan area. He took fifteen percent of the revenues, Rudolf got his fifteen percent, Galani still made a nice profit and everybody was happy.
And Rudolf had made enough money to steer the whole family through the next months. The gold coins could remain where they were: sewn into Bertha's fur coat and some other pieces of clothing.

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Some days afterwards the whole group made it to the Ligurian shores: Bertha, Zenka, Otto, Blanka and Rudolf. Aunt Böshka and her husband Paul Lantos stayed in Milan where Paul had found a job. Well, they had made their own decisions all the time, and contact with them had never been that close.
The whole lot settled in an old villa in Lido di Camaiore on the "Tuscan Riviera". This house was situated right on a mile-long promenade. It offered an unobstructed, beautiful view on the Mediterranean Sea. There were two apartments. One would serve for Blanka and Rudolf, the other one for the Selingers.

This house belonged to Signor Natalucci, an old, dignified Navy officer who had been sacked some years before because of his outspoken antifascist tendencies.
Natalucci had always been a bitter opponent of Benito Mussolini and his régime. No wonder then that he made friends with the Selingers and Rudolf right away.

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The following weeks were uneventful but not boring. Rudolf and Blanka would resume their walks on the unending, sandy beaches, on the promenade and in the “pineta”, those gorgeous pinewood forests right between the coastline and the first row of villas and hotels.
They would hardly ever take a swim though the hot period of the year was approaching and water temperatures rose rapidly. Well - there is an old Mediterranean saying which they recall:”If you live on the beach you don’t go into the water”.
Rudolf bought three used bicycles – one for Blanka, one for Otto and one for himself. It was fun to pedal to Viareggio or into the hills.
And in the afternoons there were the shops and the cafés and even a small cinema in one of the most beautiful “Liberty Style” buildings. There was the promenade with the bandstand, where the singers were indulging in old Italian songs and the bands behind them seemed to be falling asleep.

On the whole they did not have too many contacts with the locals. Rotter had asked them to be more cautious in this respect. Such is the lot of refugees. But they were not alone. The family was big, Otto had to be looked after – and there always was Signor Natalucci and his very likeable wife.
Especially the evenings on the Ligurian coast were just splendid! A little before sunset they would all gather on the terrace, have dinner together and spend the evening playing cards, chatting and watching the red glow in the evening sky. And if there was a new movie once in a while: The cinema was just around the corner.

All in all Blanka and Rudolf look back on this period as a prolonged honeymoon. It should be the most relaxed time of their lives for a very long while.

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Two or three weeks after their arrival they found additional company. A Mr. Koritchan arrived at Galani's house, accompanied by his Viennese wife Fritzi. Koritchan was a tall man with big glasses, wrinkles around his eyes and a high domed bald head. All in all he looked like a University professor. And Fritzi Koritchan was like the epitome of Viennese women: blond, blue-eyed, a round and lovely face, and a slim but well-rounded figure. They moved into some small rooms under the roof.

Rudolf was absolutely thrilled when the Koritchans arrived. He knew the man – a Jew from Zagreb! He had known him back home already.
Koritchan had been the best entertainer and show-master in town. Rudolf and his parents had admired him at numerous occasions. And now this man would be their neighbor! As it turned out the Koritchans had been in Milan as well. They wanted to leave for the same reasons the Selingers and Rudolf had left.
As Rudolf had done they had asked "Rotter&Melamet" for help. Rotter, to whom Rudolf had sent the address in Lido di Camaiore, had specifically recommended the Selingers and young Mister Kandel. A small reason for some extra pride!

The evenings with the Koritchans were truly unforgettable. When the sun had definitely settled, an early moon would lay quietly over the water across the promenade. And the large pine tree right in front of their porch would cast a pale shadow in its surprisingly strong light. This was the hour when the entertainer would tell jokes and stories without end. They all would laugh heartily and ask him for one of his sketches. Koritchan followed suit quite eagerly. After all, that was his only public by now!
Blanka and Rudolf don't remember those sketches. Yet, they recall some of the jokes and one in particular, which let them swallow their laughter:
A German Jew is arrested by a Gestapo officer. In the latter's office, the Nazi tells the Jew: " You know, one of my eyes is artificial. It is made out of glass. If you can guess, which one it is, I let you go home!" The Jew looks at the Gestapo man and says: "It is your left eye, Sir!" The Nazi answers:"You have been guessing well, Jew. But tell me – how did you know?" And the Jew says: "It has such a humane look."

A little later the Koritchans moved to a more spacious accommodation in a house in the pineta. But even then they would drop by almost every evening. Bertha and Fritzi would cook in turn. And there were many more relaxed evenings to follow.

Later on, Blanka and Rudolf would never meet the Koritchans again. But they are sure that both have survived and made it to the United States or to Canada.

It was a great time. It could have lasted for quite a while. But it didn't. Things were to change once again. They changed quickly and dramatically.

1943 (after Mussolini's downfall)

Germany
In October, Himmler justifies the annihilation of the Jews in his ill-famed "Posen speech" in front of the "SS-Elite".
The German troops on the Crimea peninsula are encircled in November. The Red Army liberates Kiev.
In December the German armies are pushed back to the western banks of the Dnjepr River.

Italy
In spite of all Italian assurances of a continuing loyalty to the "axis" the first German troops enter Italy. In August, Sicily capitulates to the Allies.
During the first days of September Allied Forces land in Calabria on the Italian mainland. Badoglio concludes an armistice agreement on September 8th. German troops begin to invade Italy and to disarm the Italian Army.
The Badoglio government and the Royal family move to Brindisi, an area soon to be occupied by the Allies.
Mussolini is liberated on September 12th by a special German SS- unit. He is brought to Vienna. Ten days later he proclaims his own Republic for the North and the Center of the country, called "Repubblicá Sociale Italiana (RSI)". Salò on Lake Garda is made the new "capital".
Towards the end of the month Corsica and Sardinia are liberated by the Allied forces. Naples is taken in October, Pescara in December. The Badoglio government declares war on Germany.

Yugoslavia
Partisans attack Trieste in October and push back the German occupiers into the center of the city. They occupy positions only 40 kilometers from Belgrade and penetrate the outskirts of Zagreb where they are driven out again.

A provisional administration under J. Ribar is formed in December. Tito is made Head of the National Defense Committee.

The Jewish People
In August, Treblinka inmates start an uprising and destroy the extermination machinery almost completely. In a similar uprising at the Sobibor camp all surviving inmates are killed. In September, the Wilna ghetto is "liquidated". The Danish resistance movement succeeds in saving almost all of the Danish Jews by shipping them to Sweden.
In October the first Jews of Rome are deported to Auschwitz – Birkenau. Systematic deportations are organized in Trieste, Genoa, Florence, Milan and other cities.

Weeks of uncertainty

When Mussolini was arrested and Marshal Badoglio took over the news spread very quickly.
The mood in Lido di Camaiore and the whole area was very strange. An unreal calm reigned in the streets that day, and the cafés remained empty. The sailors and the officers stayed in their barracks or on board of their ships. Nobody knew what would happen next.

Mussolini had gone – fine! Fine? Great! It was high time!
With the exception of a few fanatics nobody was sad about his dismissal. But what would the King and Badoglio do now? Would they continue this senseless war or would they try to reach a separate peace settlement? And if they did that, how would the Germans react? Would Hitler concede defeat or would he ask his "Wehrmacht" to intervene?

That same evening Rudolf was discussing things with Signor Natalucci. Rudolf was optimistic. "You will see, Natalucci," he laughed, "things will change for the better now! Vittorio Emanuele and Badoglio are reasonable men. They know damned well that the war is lost. And they will not allow Italy to be dragged into the criminal system of the Nazis. We will have peace and I will be able to take my family back home again".
Well, this is what one would call "rushing to conclusions". He was not altogether wrong. But it would take a long and dreadful time until his dreams came true.

Signor Natalucci took the sudden turn of events much more skeptically. He knew his country-fellows and their proverbial indecision. And he was sure that the Nazis would have to react. “Don’t forget,” he remarked, “there are German naval units in the ports around us. Do you really believe that they will disappear like this?”
There was one point, however, on which the two men agreed completely. It was great that the “Duce” had gone! “Thank God – those damned ‘black shirts’ will disappear from their offices,” Natalucci exclaimed. “ They had me sacked. And now they are out themselves. Let us have a look at the questura tomorrow!”

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The next morning Natalucci and Rudolf pedaled to Viareggio and visited the police office.
It looked more like a captain’s cabin, no wonder in a city on the seaside. Everything possible was made out of brass: the lamp pedestals, the ashtrays, the writing utensils on the tables, the picture frames and a huge vase in a corner.
An elderly officer was sitting behind one of the tables. He was the only one present. “A typical Fascist,” Rudolf thought while observing him. The officer was wearing a black shirt, a black, blouse-type jacket, black breeches in equally black boots and a black leather strap from his right shoulder to his left hip. His Balbo-type beard was as black as was his hair – tightly combed and abundantly oiled. The only other color on this man was to be found in a golden Fascist medal he wore on his left breast pocket, right over his heart.

The man was shuffling documents when Natalucci greeted him:” Hey, Nardino, how are things this morning?” The triumph and the sarcasm in his voice were barely disguised. The officer just looked up from the documents and said nothing. He picked up a letter opener and tried to clean his thumbnails with it. He still was silent. But when he lit a cigarette, his hand shook a little.
And then Natalucci discovered that Mussolini’s photo still decorated the wall. This time he got really angry.
“Don’t you know, Nardino, that times have changed?“ he shouted. And then he ripped the picture from the wall, broke the frame and tore the photo to pieces. “So much for your beloved ‘Duce’ and his criminal clique”, he said.

Signor Nardino lifted the cigarette from his lips and looked at its tip carefully. This weak gesture was his only sign of protest.

He was well acquainted with Natalucci's history and he knew better than to wage a fight. He seemed not to be a very belligerent man anyhow. The two men left and the Italian spat on the Fascist flag still hanging in front of the house.

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During the next days an interesting change took place. All their Italian contacts became very, very friendly. At least some of them obviously knew about the real identity of their guests. And they were aware of the fact that the Badoglio government would not continue with the anti-Jewish policies of the Fascists, lax as these policies might have been. As for the Selingers, Rudolf and the Koritchans, it could have been like a real summer holiday had they possessed enough money to spend.
There were many discussions about how to react to all these new developments. Should they leave and go elsewhere?
In the end they decided to stay where they were. As long as Italy still was at war with the Allies Milan would be a dangerous place to live. And a return to Zagreb and the Ustasha was out of the question anyhow. They simply had to wait for the situation to become clearer.

Lido di Camaiore remained absolutely peaceful during those strange weeks, in spite of the all the military staff around. The long-waves-program of the Italian radio was not working too well. That is why BBC still was their main source of information. That is why they were not too well informed about developments in other parts of Italy. They did not know that the lot of all the Jews in Italy improved remarkably and that camps like Ferramonti di Tarsia were gradually dissolved.

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However, they learned about one very important development. The Prisoners of War detained in Italian camps were about to be released. This was excellent news for the Selingers, and for Zenka in particular, because it meant that Mirko would be set free and could join the family in a relatively short while!

The International Committee of the Red Cross had maintained a minimum contact between PoW's and their families. The Selingers could continue to write to their beloved ones, even to Zivko in his German camp. And, for the first time ever, Blanka went to the post office quite openly and sent a parcel to

both of them. There was no compelling need to hide one's address anymore. Five kilograms were the maximum weight allowed. But you can send a lot of important items and even more hope and love this way!
End of August they were informed that Zivko had been transferred from Osnabrück in Germany to an Italian PoW-camp in Northern Italy, close to Bergamo. Wonderful – he would return as well!
They would learn about the almost miraculous circumstances of this transfer very soon.

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In the meantime Rudolf and Blanka made up their minds and decided to visit his parents in Arezzo. They hadn't seen each other for long months; they had not yet presented themselves as a married couple.

This trip turned out to be a very adventurous one. When the train was on its way to Florence British airplanes attacked it in broad daylight, not far away from the city of Empoli on the banks of the Arno River. There still was no Italian air defense system to speak of, and the soldiers guarding the transport were absolutely helpless with their outdated machine-guns. Everybody had to jump out of his or her compartment and to look for protection. "Quickly, under the car!" Rudolf yelled while he helped Blanka jump from the car.
And Blanka obeyed. They sneaked between the rails, lay flat on their stomachs and tried to protect their heads with their arms. Hell broke loose around them: The shrill roar of the low flying planes, bursts of fire, shouting, senseless orders and the groaning of the wounded.

And then, all of a sudden, the planes turned away to gain their home base. Rudolf peered from under the railroad car and saw them as black dots in a blue sky. And then they were gone altogether. Only the groaning of the wounded interrupted an almost complete silence.
What an idiotic situation! he thought. Here we are, two Zagreb Jews, fighting to stay alive, completely on your side. And then you come to kill us! And he thought that even the Italians on the train probably would share his convictions. Well – war is not only horrible and senseless. It can be bizarre as well.

Some soldiers stayed with the wounded to wait for the ambulances to arrive.

The train, with its locomotive luckily unharmed, moved on as soon as possible. Fighter planes like nothing more than sitting ducks.

Blanka and Rudolf had to change trains in Florence again. This time they were able to leave Santa Maria Novella station since their next connection was two hours off. After a roll and a coffee at the station's buffet they went to visit the homonymous church right across the street. They admired the Ghirlandaio frescoes and Masaccio's "Trinity". They were impressed by Paolo Ucello's exercises in perspective in the cloisters as well as by the beautiful marble front of the church. So much more to see and so little time! They promised each other to come back when circumstances would be more propitious.
On their way to Arezzo they had to endure another air raid. Fortunately it was of a very short duration and did not cause great damage. And after long hours they finally arrived in the city of Vasari, of Pietro Aretino, of the late Giotto and of Rudolf's parents.

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Cecilia, Mavro and aunt Ruzha still lived in the same boarding house they had chosen after their confinement two years ago. After an emotional welcome Rudolf and Blanka were invited to the small dining room right away. Since the young couple had announced its arrival by a telegram, the two women and the landlady had prepared a „festive dinner to honor our children," as Cecilia had announced proudly.

Rudolf was stunned to see a lit Menorah on the table. And then he remembered: it was Friday night, Shabbat eve! "Have you turned religious these days?" he inquired. His father embraced him and smiled. "Not exactly," he answered. "But since we were unable to attend your Catholic wedding we thought that a little Jewish touch would be not too bad. A Jewish friend here from Arezzo has lent us one of his Menorahs".

A wonderful evening followed with good food and hearty toasts, brought out by everybody, the few other guests of the boarding house included. An "Ethiopian cake" came as a particular surprise. It was a huge chocolate cake, decorated with fruit and some strange feathers. When Blanka inquired about this interesting dessert the landlady explained it to her:
"Well, until the death of my husband I have worked in the largest hotel in Arezzo.

And, from time to time, I still help out there. The well-to-do families and the Fascist bureaucrats go there for dinner and all sorts of festivities, birthdays, weddings and others."

She sighed, but Rudolf couldn't make out if it was to express regret or relief. "One of those festivities was organized to celebrate our great victory over Ethiopia. And it was then that the 'Ethiopian cake' – a monstrous thing – was being served. It had been prepared with ostrich eggs and was decorated with ostrich feathers.
Well – after we have been thrown out of Africa – no more commemoration, no more cake. And since the feathers were lying around in a shed, I have taken them with me."
The landlady laughed, the guests laughed, and somebody said jokingly:"To Ethiopia!" And the cake did not survive for long.

After the dinner Blanka, Rudolf and the Kandels sat together for a long time. They told each other about what had happened during the last months. There was a lot to tell. They recounted their wonderful days and years in pre-war Zagreb. And they dreamed about a common future once this madness would be over.
Initially, Rudolf and Blanka had intended to return the next morning. But his parents urged them to stay for one day at least. "We want to show you 'our' town," they said.

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While visiting this beautiful city with Mavro as a meticulous guide, Rudolf had the distinct impression that his parents felt quite at home at Arezzo. They moved around freely, knew a lot of people and a nice coffee bar or two. "As you can see, our confinement is not too bad," Mavro joked. "If we only knew how things will develop now. We have seen a few German troops already the day before yesterday. Let us hope that everything remains under control".
"Mavro, let us not talk about problems today," Cecilia admonished him. " We have so little time together".

Exploring medieval Tuscan cities in summer can be strenuous. They looked for a shady place and had an early luncheon.
Cautiously, Rudolf inquired about his parents' financial situation. Though it seemed to be less than satisfactory, his father refused to take any money from his son. " I am glad that you have made such a big deal," he stated, " but you have to look after the Selingers as well."

Rudolf waited for a better moment. This moment came after an extended "siesta" when they went out to the shopping area in the late and cool afternoon. While Mavro had taken Blanka into an old pharmacy Rudolf was alone with his mother. He simply stuffed a small bundle of banknotes into the pocket of her jacket. Cecilia smiled, kissed her son and said nothing.

Blanka and Rudolf left Arezzo the next morning after a leisurely breakfast. They regained Lido di Camaiore without any further incident.

The "Empire of the Evil" strikes back!

On September 8th the Italian Radio broadcasted the news about the armistice Badoglio had concluded with the Allies - apparently with the full consent of his King
The initial feeling was one of deep relief. An irrational hope took over. Even Rudolf, let alone the ladies or Otto, wanted to believe that this was the end of the war and of their personal turmoil. The Germans would retreat and the Allies would come!

They had better shared Signor Natalucci's sober assessment. Within a day the feeling of relief brutally changed into one of shock and anxiety. The "Hitler Empire" stroke back, quickly and deadly!

Very soon the information was received that a whole armored division of the German "Wehrmacht" had reached Lucca. It had disarmed the Italian garrison there – albeit after a little fighting.
And then a strong detachment was sent to Viareggio and Lido di Camaiore. The German units had come to eliminate the potential resistance of loyal Italian units, including those in a military training center for Italian marines as well as the young officers in one of the two Naval Academies. Curiously enough the second academy was occupied by cadets of the German Navy who now had gotten the order to help their comrades-in-arms approaching from Lucca.

Blanka and Rudolf remember these dramatic hours quite vividly:
" We had pedaled from Lido di Camaiore to Viareggio where the next post office was to be found.

This post office was located in the same building complex as the Italian "commandatura", the local military headquarters. We wanted to call some friends, emigrants who were staying in nearby Bagni di Lucca. Everybody wanted to know where the Germans were and what they were doing.
While we were waiting for a free telephone set, a deep grumbling was setting in – in the distance first, but getting louder very quickly. It was absolutely frightful! An Italian came in and shouted 'The Germans are there!' And then a strong detonation, accompanied by a deafening noise, shook the building to its foundations. All the windows shattered and there was dust all over the place!
We threw ourselves on the floor. It was almost as bad as during the air raids in Milan. A shell from a German tank had hit the „commandatura".
We left the post office as quickly as we could. The Italian soldiers who had stood guard at the military outpost ran for cover and fled.
Two or three tanks drove by full speed. Apparently they headed for the small harbor. And then we saw the first German soldiers in full battle-gear and with their submachine-guns ready to fire. That was a sight, which made us shiver.
We left the building very cautiously, took our bicycles and pedaled back to Lido di Camaiore as quickly as we could".

Yes – the Germans had arrived. Soldiers, cars and tanks were everywhere. The Italian troops had been taken prisoner without a shot being fired. Lido di Camaiore was in the hands of the enemy.

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The vacation-like period on the Ligurian coast would come to an abrupt end rather soon.
Rudolf and the Selingers knew that they had to leave before very long. Their cover, including their precious papers, was not worth much anymore. They could fool or impress the Italians with their documents, but the Germans? These people were of a different class.

Since they had no way of contacting "Rotter&Melamet" on such a short notice, Natalucci was the only one they could ask for help. This courageous man, although in great danger himself, took the bus and went into the nearby hills.
When he came back he smiled and said:"Here is an address in a place called Vado. I know a farmer there. He will hide you for some days, or even weeks, whenever you want to go there."

They decided to stay for another week. And then they would resume their wanderings. But this time they would have to go into real hiding.

(Final Status before linguistic control: February,2002)

INTO HIDING

Mirko shows up – miraculously!

Three days later the Selingers and Rudolf were sitting on the terrace, well protected by one of those large screen the Italians like to use on the beaches, and enjoyed one of their last siestas on the Ligurian coast. After a while Bertha got up and looked down on the promenade. She noticed a man in rugged military clothes a little further up the road. He was asking directions of the locals sitting on the park benches.
Bertha hesitated, looked again, and then she screamed at the top of her voice: " There is Mirko!" The whole group looked at her and turned silent. Zenka grew pale and started to shiver. She rushed to the balustrade, peered down and shouted: "Mirko! Mirko! Here we are!"

The man looked up, stopped in his tracks and waved. And then he ran as fast as he could. So did Zenka. They met at the doorsteps, held each other in a long embrace, laughed and cried, cried and laughed. Mirko had come back!

The embraces continued on the terrace. Everybody was absolutely thrilled, of course. When the first excitement had subsided, he was showered with questions from all sides. "Let me have something to drink, first," he asked with a broad grin. Zenka rushed to the kitchen and came back with a big glass of wine, a jug filled with water and some fruit.
And then Mirko told his story. It was hard to believe, but it was true.

Like almost all the other prisoners he had been released from his PoW-camp in Northern Italy a week earlier. His only idea had been: I have to get back to my family as soon as possible! He had caught a train to Bologna. From there he wanted to proceed to Florence, Lucca and Viareggio.
While he was waiting for his connection at Bologna main station, he heard from some Italians that the Germans were occupying Italy. His train to Florence was cancelled. The next one would leave only four hours later, and Mirko decided to wait for it patiently. He was dozing on a bench on his platform, when his attention was called by some loud orders on the next track. He opened his eyes. To his stupefaction he saw a group of soldiers dressed in the uniform of the Military police. They sealed off the whole track.

A little later, a long train entered the station. It unloaded hundreds of German soldiers, which gathered on the platform and formed an orderly column.

And then they started to march into town. The Germans had arrived very quickly, indeed!

Mirko knew that he couldn't use the railway system to continue his trip. There would be intensive controls by the Military Police. The Italians hadn't given a damn about him being a Jew. But what if the Germans found out?

He left the station, took a tram to the western outskirts of Bologna and started walking. He walked for long hours each day, catching a truck or a carriage from time to time. When he finally made it to Lucca, he was so tired that he took the risk and bought a train ticket to Viareggio with his last money.
What happened next was simply out of this world!
A German army patrol at Lucca train station noticed his military clothing. "Who are you, where do you come from and where are you going?" the officer in command asked him. Mirko answered in his defective German, but with a firm voice: " I am a former Yugoslav soldier. I have been released by the authorities from my PoW-camp in Northern Italy. I am looking for my family. This is rather difficult. They are Jews like me. They are living somewhere in the Viareggio area".

The German officer looked at him and held his breath incredulously. Then he asked Mirko:"Do you know what you just have told me, Jew?" Mirko nodded, still unaware of the terrible mistake he had made. The officer looked again – and then he roared with laughter. "You know", he gasped," you are the greatest idiot I have ever met in my life! There comes a Jew – quite in the open at that – and tells me his story! Now I tell you something, Jew: Run to the Viareggio train as fast as you can. If not I will have to arrest you and then go after your family as well!"
Shaking his head the officer turned his back. The patrol went away, still chuckling about what they just had heard. And all of a sudden his immense act of stupidity dawned upon Mirko. He ran to the far end of the train, hid in the corner of an empty compartment and shivered. The Germans did not come back, and he reached Viareggio.

The Selingers and Rudolf would not believe him at first. He had to tell his story all over again. And then tension became relief. Everybody laughed loudly. Another bottle of wine was opened and the "Yugoslav soldier" was welcomed with a hearty "Lechaim!"

Zenka and Mirko moved to the rooms under the roof where the Koritchans had stayed. The next day Rudolf and Mirko went to town. They bought some civilian clothing.
Rudolf had to do the talking since Mirko's proficiency in languages was very poor, although he had spent more than two years in an Italian PoW-camp.

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Their last evening in Lido di Camaiore had come, and it was another gorgeous sunset in the West.
They looked at it through the windows of their apartment. It had become too dangerous to sit on the terrace. When darkness had fallen, Signor Natalucci dropped by furtively. He had come for a farewell drink. And the mood was one of melancholy and sadness.

They would never meet the Italian again. When Rudolf and Blanka visited Lido di Camaiore in the Seventies the house was still there. It was completely neglected. They asked some neighbors about the Natalucci family. Both Mr. and Mrs. Natalucci had died a couple of years before. Their house would be put on compulsory sale because a rich Milanese investor wanted the property to build a modern hotel.

The Vado intermezzo and Zivko's return

They all did their suitcases and left Lido di Camaiore two days later.
As a measure of precaution the family split in two groups. Rudolf and Blanka would take care of Bertha, Mirko and Zenka would be accompanied by Otto. The sun was not shining, and a hard wet rain had set in.
A last, wistful look over the Mediterranean Sea, and then they took different busses, one in the morning and another one in the early afternoon. A day earlier their new host had been informed accordingly by Signora Natalucci.

These busses brought them to Vado, the village assigned to them by their Italian friends. Vado was a place located some 6 miles to the East of Lido di Camaiore. The village was comfortably nestled in the green foothills of the Apuan Alps. There was the long winding village street with a few shops, the church, a tiny town hall and a few stately houses around the main square. And there were scattered farmhouses in the fields and gardens around the settlement. "Their" farmer picked them up at the bus station and brought them

to his place, which was both conveniently close to and sufficiently far away from the village.

They had found their next provisional retreat.

Vado was only a far cry from the lively atmosphere of Lido di Camaiore and the coast. The farmer, Tonio Bucchi, was small, lean and tough. He had spent his life with hard work, and not only his hands showed it. His gray eyes seemed to be on the watch all the time, but his smile was friendly and his whole posture was quite relaxed. His wife Maria was a typical Italian "mamma" – complete with an apron, a black dress, a gentle mind and a big, big heart.
They accommodated their guests as best as they could although the house and the barns offered rudimentary comfort only. There was no heating or warm water system, of course; but there was a big stove in the kitchen, a lot of wood and a whole battery of kettles. There were no mattresses; but there were bags filled with straw and thick woolen blankets.
Electricity was provided to the living room of the Bucchis. Kerosene lamps lit the rest of the house.
Unfortunately there were no books as well. There was just a calendar of the regional farmers' association. It showed Botticelli's famous "Venus" in a rather smeary rendering due to imperfectly registered color plates. But all the essential beauty was there, and with it the inimitable greatness of the Master's lines. Whenever Blanka looked at it she was reminded of the beautiful days at the seaside.

To their great relief the farmer did not ask for much money. Yet, when the men offered to help him with the harvest, he gladly accepted. His two sons were serving in the army somewhere close to Venice, and he could need help.
Rudolf, Mirko and Otto liked the countryside, the fields, a small vineyard and the animals. And some physical exercise would do them good! When they returned after a good day's work they were hungry like wolves. Otto in particular would take in enormous amounts of food. With his fourteen years he had developed into a handsome young man.
To Rudolf's delight there was even an old horse, which he loved to mount for short rides around the stables.

There was practically no contact with the people in the village. The Selingers and Rudolf did not want to create any suspicion, even if it meant renouncing on an espresso or a drink in the local bar. They already were a rather large and conspicuous group in such a small community.

Thank God there was no Carabinieri office in the locality and there were no soldiers, either.

What they lacked most during the first days of their stay were means of information and communication. The farmer had a radio. That was the main reason why he had electricity in his living room. But they did not yet dare to ask him if they could listen into BBC.

A few evenings later Maria invited everybody for a big pot of gorgeous pasta. With it came a plate of tasty tomatoes and a lot of venison. Signor Bucchi shared the national Italian passion for hunting, and not even wartimes convinced him to refrain from it. September was the start of the hunting season, and he enjoyed every moment of it. The previous day he had been lucky and shot three big hares.
Over dinner he asked his guests, quite to their surprise:" Would you like to know what is really going on in the world?" And then he turned on his radio, tuning into BBC's English speaking program. After a while the well-known kettledrums announced the evening news. Tonio offered them to come back in the evenings. In such a way they learned that the Allied troops were progressing, but awfully slowly!
The frontline still was way down in the South, somewhere between Naples in the West and Foggia on the Lower Adriatic coast.

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Two days later young Otto took the bicycle from one of the barns. He had brought it with him to Vado on the roof of the bus. It was afternoon and he had finished his work in the fields for the day. "Where are you going?" his mother asked apprehensively. " I am going to Lido di Camaiore, to 'our' old house," he replied. " I have not had a real a bath or even a shower for more than ten days now, I am all sweat and I feel very uncomfortable. It is only half an hour to go down there".
Bertha was unhappy. Somehow the boy had gotten hold of the keys of the house down there, which they had retained for a reason neither Blanka nor Rudolf recall. She protested, she talked about the dangers he would face eventually, but Otto laughed and simply pedaled away. Mirko and Rudolf were still in the fields, too far away to call them, too far away to hold him back.

A couple of hours later, when the rest of the family was sitting in front of the farmhouse, anxiously waiting for him, Otto returned. He returned in style and – he was not alone!

A carriage, drawn by two horses, approached the entrance gate of the farm compound. In the carriage: Otto, two men and Otto's bicycle. When the men got out Bertha was quite unable to grasp what she saw.
One of them was her husband! Zivko was back! She went pale and wiped her eyes as if she had come back from a dream. But then she recovered her breath and ran to the carriage. That is what everybody else did, too.

Bertha and Zivko had tears in their eyes when they embraced each other. The rest of the family stood back in a spontaneous gesture of respect. Then, after a round of generous hugs and kisses they all went back to the house. And then young Otto interrupted the emotional atmosphere announcing:
"Well, not too many tears, please! Rudolf, you are our treasurer. You will have to pay the owner of the carriage."
And that was exactly what Rudolf did without any comment or sign of protest. He couldn't help but think: Well, young Otto is growing up very rapidly! And somehow he was proud of his brother-in-law.

The first excitement had subsided. They were all sitting around a big wooden table in the courtyard. Zenka had brought fresh water, some bread, home made cheese and some grapes. It was Zivko's turn now to tell his astonishing story the first half of which they more or less knew already. His companion had found himself a quiet corner in the barns and gone to sleep.

"Well – as you all will remember the Germans had made me a prisoner-of-war in April 1941," Zivko started his tale. "They escorted me to a train and brought me to an Officer's camp near Osnabrück". "Where on earth is that?" Otto wanted to know. His father replied: "It is in Lower Saxony, somewhere north of the Ruhr area. Thank God, this camp was run by German police forces and by the army, not by the SS or another Nazi unit."
Jivko emptied his glass and continued:
"The treatment of the prisoners had been harsh, and there was a lot of animosity between us and the guardians. Yet, the basic rules of the Geneva Convention were more or less respected.
Those camp authorities at Osnabrück knew from the outset that I was Jewish. They must have been told by one of my Yugoslav comrades. Well, I really don't know why the Germans treated me like everybody else. Perhaps it was because I was an officer and had fought for the Austrians in the World War."

Everybody had listened very attentively. Only Zenka had left briefly and quietly. She came back from the kitchen with glasses and a big bottle of dark red wine. She filled the glasses and another toast was pronounced to Zivko and his happy return. And Blanka's father went on.

While he was sitting in Osnabrück another astonishing development had taken place.

Victor, Zivko's brother, was now working for the Schenker hauling company out of their branch in Switzerland. The Swiss had procured him with first-class papers and he was able to move around absolutely freely.
He had some business in Northern Italy. By the way - from time to time he visited his family when he was in Milan. Over there he fell in love with a young lady whom he used to see whenever he was in town. This woman was the personal secretary of the Principessa di Savoia, a member of the Italian Royals. Furthermore, the Principessa was the president of the Italian Red Cross.

In the autumn of 1942 Victor took the courage to ask his Italian companion a big favor. He told her the story of his brother and begged for Zivko`s transfer to Italy. The secretary agreed to plead his cause with the princess. The latter was duly impressed – and she wanted to do a favor to her loyal and efficient employee.
She informed her colleagues at the German Red Cross. She suggested that Zivko be transferred to an Italian PoW-camp since he should be closer to his family.
For reasons unknown, yet astonishingly enough the German authorities agreed. They had all his clothes and his uniform cleaned and pressed, returned his personal belongings and put him on a train to Italy. A corporal of the German army accompanied and guarded Zivko. At the German border station on the Brenner Pass he was handed over to the Italian police authorities and brought to a PoW-camp in the Bergamo area. As a former officer he enjoyed some form of preferential treatment and was able to establish a regular contact with his family again.
So much for the first, quite unusual part of his story.

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Yet, the second part was even more astonishing.

"Like Mirko and so many others," Zivko continued," I have been set free during the 'Badoglio interlude' albeit only at the very end of it. However, better late than never! Anyhow - the Germans started to occupy Italy only two days after my release.
I had your address and wanted to reach Lido di Camaiore, but this had become very difficult. The soldiers, the killers of the SS and the Gestapo were

everywhere! And they would not behave as 'gentlemanlike' as the German army had done in Osnabrück."
"But what about this other guy who is sleeping in the barn?" Otto wanted to know.
"Well, he is an ex-Yugoslavian soldier from Slovenia who had been taken prisoner by the Italians. I have asked him to come with me. His Italian is excellent and mine is not. Besides – I thought that we might help each other."
Zivko had a piece of bread and some cheese. He wiped his mouth with his handkerchief and went on:
"Do you want to know how we arrived at the Ligurian coast? I will tell you – we walked all the way down here! At times, when we were too close to larger cities, we had to hide during the day and walk during the night. Walking under the stars may be nice – but not if your feet ache like hell!"

This reminded him to take his shoes off. And then he told the rest of his adventure.
They had found shelter and food with Italians from time to time. However, they were very weak when they finally reached Lido di Camaiore. They arrived at the address they knew. But they did not know that the Selingers and Rudolf had already moved to Vado. The letter Bertha had written to him announcing their move had never reached him. It must have gone lost in the general turmoil. Or it might have arrived when Zivko had already left.

The two men rang the bell. At first, nobody answered. They rang again since they were able to hear the noise of running water through an open window on the first floor. Again, nobody answered. They rang for a third time. And then a young man appeared at the window, soaked with water. It was Otto who was just taking his shower!

Zivko recognized his son immediately and when Otto asked: "Who is it?" he shouted:" It is me, your father!" Otto looked down with a blank face. He had not seen Zivko for more than two years. This is a long time for a fourteen-year-old boy. And his father had changed a lot. He was unshaven, absolutely worn out and had lost at least twenty pounds.
But then the son recognized the father as well. He shouted:"Wait, I come!" put on his trousers in a hurry, ran down the staircase, opened the door and fell into Zivko's arms.

Another emotional scene followed as can be imagined quite easily. What an extraordinary coincidence! Fate had it that Zivko and his Slovene companion arrived exactly during those hours Otto had chosen to come down from Vado!

Zivko Selinger presented his son to his companion. And then he asked:"What about the others? Where are they?"
Otto said: "We are all living in a place called Vado now, up in the hills but not too far from here. Everybody is fine and uncle Mirko is with us. He has come from his PoW-camp just a short while ago – just like you!"

Zivko was feeling absolutely worn out. That is why he suggested: "Can't we stay here until tomorrow? My friend and me need a solid rest very urgently. And there is no way for us to walk up to your hiding place. We simply wouldn't make it."" "No way," Otto replied dryly. "Mama would kill me. She has been awaiting you for weeks already. By the way: Who has mentioned walking? You will not have to walk. I will get us some transport".
He took the two men to a carriage center close to the railway station. He asked the next driver to bring them to Vado. And when his father asked:"But do you have any money on you? We don't," Otto smiled. "That is no problem. "Rudolf will pay. He has enough cash with him".

"That is how we arrived here." Zivko got up. "I am very sorry. But I am absolutely flat. Bertha, please give me some water. I have to wash myself. And then I have to sleep – for ten hours if possible."
Blanka's parents left the table. Zenka cleared the plates and the glasses. And then they all went to bed.

That night everybody was shaken by emotions. Vado, Mirko's and now Zivko's return – that simply was too much for a couple of short days. But not only Bertha – everybody was absolutely happy with the turn of events. They were together again! What else did count? And together they would face their future - whatever this future would hold for them.

The young Slovene soldier left the next morning. He wanted to reach the zone controlled by the Allies and then join the partisans in Yugoslavia.

Into the Mountains again

In late autumn Mussolini's puppet state, the "Italian Social Republic", issued a set of laws of a clearly anti-Jewish nature. On November 30, the Minister of the Interior ordered the arrest and internment of the Jews of any nationality and the seizure of their property. This text was released to the newspapers and broadcast by the radio on December 1, 1943.

And a lot of rumors were spread in conjunction with these laws. It was said that special SS – units were apprehending and deporting Jews without informing the Italian authorities at all. Sadly enough this was not a rumor but the horrible truth. Eichmann had sent one of his aides, SS-Hauptsturmführer Theodor Dannecker, as a special envoy. He had been given the order to organize and to lead those death squads.

Another unconfirmed information said that all those who would hide refugees without proper papers were threatened with severe punishment, even with the death penalty. Ant it was there that a serious problem should arise.

Signor Bucchi had heard about these rumors while visiting the weekly market in Viareggio. When he came home he summoned his guests immediately. "Dear friends," he told them with a clearly discernable urgency in his voice, " that is too much for us. These may be false rumors. But who knows for sure? For my wife and me it has been an honor to lodge you here. But we are not going to risk our lives for it!"
Zivko answered for all of them. "Well, we understand. But what are you asking from us?" "This is unfortunately very simple," the farmer replied. " Either you all show me foolproof permits or you will have to leave within the next 24 hours. I am very sorry about that, but we don't want get into real trouble".

When his guests returned to their quarters they engaged in another heated discussion. It was almost like in the old Zagreb times! How could they find a new hiding place on such a short notice? Natalucci would not be able to help them once again. Wouldn't he, the well-known anti-fascist, be in great danger anyhow? And "Rotter&Melamet" could not be reached quickly from Vado either.

They had to gain some time. But how?

In the end it was decided that Blanka and Rudolf would run the risk and go to the Police Headquarters in Viareggio. They would try to verify all those rumors and get a permit for Vado, if possible. Bertha put one of her two diamond brooches on the table - as a potential means of convincing the commanding officer.
They took the morning bus to Viareggio. It was a short ride of less than half an hour. They entered Police Headquarters (which Rudolf knew only too well from his visit with Natalucci a few months ago!) and asked to be received by the "commandante".

When they were shown into his office Rudolf stopped in his tracks. Who was sitting behind the monstrous table and in the midst of all those brass items? Commandante Nardino, the same man whom he had visited with Natalucci! And Benito Mussolini was greeting them from the wall again. He was looking as preposterous as ever, but it seemed to Rudolf as if he were maliciously grinning at them.
Rudolf's heart sank and he gripped the hand of his surprised wife. This had to be it! They would never leave this office as free people again!
Like Rudolf, Nardino's memory had worked instantaneously. "Good morning, my dear friends", he greeted them with a broad smile and straightened his black shirt. "What can I do for you?" And then he added: "I see that you have left your friend Natalucci at home today. That is very wise".

Rudolf was feverishly looking for a solution. And he found it when he was reading in Nardino's face. A sort of panic twitched in the depth of the eyes as if it hade been there for quite a while. The Fascist looked frightened somehow, and those eyes were like the ones of the horse up at the farm in Vado when Rudolf had tried to mount it. And then he remarked another oddity: Nardino still was all black, from the hair to the boots. But he did not wear his Fascist medal any more!
Rudolf thought: This man knows that he is defending a lost cause! He knows it and he is probably looking for some re-insurance. He can be had in the end!
Mustering all his courage, Rudolf started a real speech:" Well, Signor Commandante, you know that we are Slovenes, my wife and I and all my family. We have been bombed in Milan and came to seek refuge here in Lido di Camaiore. Our problems have been exacerbated by the return of my wife's father and uncle from Italian PoW-camps. But what is really disturbing for us is the aggressive presence of your German friends.
They might take us for I don't know whom and arrest us right away. That is why we have gone into hiding in Vado. "

The Commandante was waving him to go on. And that is what Rudolf did – with a slightly trembling wife at his side:
"We are living there with farmers who have become our good friends. But they are frightened stiff because of all those rumors concerning the death penalty for those who house refugees. Is there any substance to those rumors? And if so, could we very politely ask you to issue a permit to us, which would enable us to stay in Vado for a little while? You know, it takes some time to arrange for a new place in another region of Italy. Please, let us stay with Italians. We really mistrust the Germans".

Nardino asked him: “Have you finished?“ When Rudolf nodded, he sat up behind his grotesquely pompous table, in his grotesquely pompous uniform. And, like in a sign of deep reflection, he put his face in one of his hands. After a while he lifted his eyes and looked at Rudolf again who thought: No, these are not the eyes of a frightened horse. These are the eyes of a frightened rabbit!
Nardino said: “As far as the legislation you mentioned is concerned I don’t have any precise information. I heard about it in the radio as you did, but we have not gotten any orders yet. As a consequence I can neither confirm the rumors nor deny them.”
And then he added with a voice full of deep frustration and exhaustion:
“ My dear friends, I think I know pretty well who you really are. And if you are Jews, you don’t have to be afraid of me. Look at me as a formerly convinced Fascist who has lost all, really all his confidence in Mussolini. I don’t want to have any part in anti-Semitic policies. And the Germans are not my cup of tea, either. I am a Fascist, but I am an Italian as well!”

Commandante Nardino got up and went to a cupboard from which he took a printed form, a rubber stamp and a fountain pen. And then he produced a permit of residence for the whole family. It was valid for Vado and for one month. Rudolf and Blanka thanked him with a deep sigh of relief. At least they would be able to celebrate her nineteenth and his twenty fourth birthday in familiar surroundings. Besides, this document would enable them to carefully prepare the ground for their next hiding-place. And they hadn’t even needed the diamond – broach! Bertha was particularly happy with that.

Tonio and Maria agreed to keep them for another while. By the way, it turned out that they were never incommoded by the Germans or by anybody else.

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To prepare their next refuge Rudolf traveled to Arezzo once more.
Not only did he want to see his parents again. He wanted to be closer to them than in the past. They might need his help in times, which announced themselves as a lot more difficult than the last two years.
Furthermore – and that is what he told Blanka and her family - the mountains around Arezzo probably would be a safe place to spend the winter months. Why not hide there, since they had to leave the coastal region anyhow?
He arrived in Arezzo after a trip that had become even more complicated than the last one. There were no air raids this time, but the Italian rail network had

been thoroughly destroyed in many places and the necessary repairs were proceeding very slowly. Rudolf had to change between trains and busses with many detours on the way.

His parents and aunt Ruzha were very glad to see him again, of course. They were full of joy when they heard that Mirko and Zivko had come back. And they were perfectly happy to learn that Rudolf and the Selingers were coming to the Arezzo area. In some way they would be together again – even if it was a rather virtual togetherness.

Furthermore, they had important news as well.

After Mussolini's "comeback" Mavro had been warned several times. There was a sizeable German presence in town now. And apparently both the "questura" and Town Hall in Via Sestania had been taken over by Fascist hardliners. These people would execute any set of anti-Jewish measures quite ruthlessly!
The relatively few followers of those hardliners had started their own shabby crusade in town. A villa belonging to a wealthy Jewish merchant had been burnt down. And Jewish shops had been smeared with inscriptions such as "Negozio Ebreo" – Jewish shop – or "Vietato agli Ebrei ed ai Cani" – forbidden for Jews and dogs. All in the entire climate had become rather cold and hostile.

As a consequence they had decided to go into hiding. They had already looked for a suitable place and had found a tiny apartment in Poppi, a small town in the upper Arno valley, not far from the springs of the river. They would move there in a week or two.
Aunt Ruzha, who had done the searching, added:" I have come across an acceptable farmhouse further up in the mountains, in a place called Badia Prataglia. It was too big for us, and Mavro didn't like the altitude because of his heart condition. But this could fit you very well!"
Rudolf was a little doubtful. Another winter in a farmhouse. The last one hadn't been cozy at all – up in Villa d'Ogna the Bergamasque Mountains. Yet, there was not much choice. To survive, they would have to accommodate a little more.

Ruzha and Rudolf took the bus to Badia Prataglia the next morning. They went to the farmhouse, which was still available. The owners agreed to take them, but they asked to get an advance payment for three months – in cash, please! When Rudolf laid some bills on the table the farmer's wife poked at

them with greedy fingers and stuffed them into the depths of her aprons. Rudolf didn't like what he saw. But then he thought:" Well, avidity is at least a vice, which we can calculate rather easily". He announced: "In a few days I will be back with my whole family ".

He returned to Arezzo and had another evening with his parents. And the next morning he went back to Vado. Great clouds of smoke above the industrial areas of Florence, Empoli and Lucca reminded him of the fact that War was lying in wait even if he didn't see it directly.
The family packed the suitcases once again (they looked quite worn by now), thanked the Maria and Antonio Bucchi and said good-bye to the farm, the fields and the animals. In spite of all the hardship it had been a good time in the Viareggio hills, indeed!
For additional security the family split into two groups once more. But they made sure to use the same trains and busses, because the trip was a rather complicated and tortuous one.

They arrived in Badia Prataglia in the deep dark of a cold night and made it to their new "home". Christmas of 1943 was approaching and with it the end of another year they had survived in the most extraordinary circumstances.
Milan - the marriage – Lake Como – Desenzano del Garda – Lido di Camaiore – the arrival of the Germans and the home-coming of Jivko and Mirko – Vada - and now Badia Prataglia:
It had been an extraordinary year, indeed. And they were sure that the next one would not be less intense either.

1944 (To the liberation of Rome)

Germany

In January the Red Army reaches the eastern borders of former Poland. It entered the first piece of territory controlled by the Nazis before their assault on the Soviet Union in June 1941. The German siege of Leningrad is broken. The German Air Force is decisively hit in heavy fighting on all fronts. German troops occupy Hungary in March against all previous assurances. The reason: Hitler is afraid of the progressing Red Army. Soviet troops enter Romania, liberate the Crimea peninsula and reach the Eastern border of Czechoslovakia in April.

At the Western theatre, the Allied Armies – after careful preparations - begin the invasion of France on June 6th. And even some of the hardliners in Hitler's military command structure realize that the war is lost.

Italy

In January, former Fascist leaders who had helped to bring down Mussolini by their vote in July 1943 are brought to trial in Verona. Five of them are executed, amongst them Count Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law.

US-troops land in Anzio, south of Rome, and form a bridgehead there after heavy fighting.

The Allies transfer all civil authority in Sicily, Sardinia and Southern Italy to Badoglio and his government, which includes the communists a little later. Heavy air strikes in Turin and other industrial centers of the North lead to massive strikes of the workers. In the "Fosse Ardeatine" 335 Roman citizens are shot at close range as retaliation for the death of 33 German soldiers and policemen.

In May, the Allies take the Montecassino defense line. Rome is liberated on June 4th.

Yugoslavia

Randolph Churchill is meeting with Tito in order to discuss a closer cooperation between the partisans and the Yugoslav Government in exile. While he is present German paratroopers attack Tito's Headquarters – without result. A delegation of Tito's armed forces is visiting Moscow and London in order to procure military support.

Partisans conquer the Hvar Island in May.

The Jewish People

As of April, hundreds of thousands of Jews from South-Eastern Europe are deported to Auschwitz and gassed there. Allied reconnaissance planes bring home the first pictures of the Auschwitz complex. Alfred Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba escape from the extermination camp in Birkenau. They bring detailed information to the West.

At Montecassino, Jewish military units fight together with the Allies.

The Lublin concentration camp is closed in July.

Winter months in the Apennines

Soon after their arrival Rudolf found out that Badia Prataglia was very suitably located – given the circumstances. The locality was small. There was a small office for the local police, but no military outpost at that time. As it had been the case in Vado, their farmhouse, grouped with some others around a little square with a chapel and a few trees, was inconspicuously situated at the edge of the small town.

The level of comfort was not higher than in Vado – but then they had gotten used to rough circumstances. And the most important problem, heating (it was a harsh winter up there at an altitude of more than 800 meters!), was solved as they had solved it in the Bergamo Mountains: A big, open chimney and a whole battery of "prete". When they found out that Badia Prataglia and Jerusalem were located at practically the same altitude Jivko joked: "The altitude is OK. What is lacking are just the longitude and the latitude!" "And the weather!" Blanka added.

The next city, Bibbiena, was only ten miles away and there were two daily bus connections. One of the women would go shopping once or twice a week for all of them. Everybody had to do with local produce and the customary staple food such as corn, pasta and dried beans.

There was another similarity to Vado: Badia had been built on both sides of the main road, completed by two squares with churches, a small hospital and the town hall on one of them. This main road came up from Bibbiena and left the small town on the other side, winding up to Passo di Mondrioli, Bagna di Romagna, Cesena and the Adriatic coast. In case of necessity this could serve as an additional escape route.

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For Rudolf and Blanka it was not new, but for Zivko and Mirko it was a first experience: Farm life in winter is uneventful, sometimes outright dull. Besides of a little repair work on the house, the stables or the machinery, there is not much to do in this season. Furthermore, their host and his wife were very quiet people who liked to be left alone. They had no radio so that the refugees were without regular information about what went on in the World and on the Italian frontlines in particular. Books were not to be found on the

farm, either. The only reading material consisted of some old calendars and a Bible in Italian language.

There was one small local newspaper per week, which the women brought back from their trips to the market in Bibbiena. They didn't learn much reading it. However, they were well aware of the fact that the major frontline were still painfully far down South, somewhere between Naples and Pescara on the Adriatic coast, and that a major battle was fought at the Abbey of Montecassino.

Well, everybody tried to fight boredom as well as possible.

That was most difficult for Blanka's mother in particular.
Bertha had been accustomed to run a large household and to run the family with it. And up here in the Apennines there was not much left to run. Their rooms were small and it was rather easy to keep them tidy. Besides, Blanka would help her to clean them and to do the washing. Zenka would keep the clothing in shape, since there were no clients for her in Badia Prataglia anyhow.
And to run the family? It burned down to a simple ritual: To determine the luncheon and dinner hours. Bertha saw to it that they were scrupulously respected. She had always been a great cook and worked wonders with the few things available in a small town up in the mountains, in winter and in wartime. Blanka always remembered Bertha's "polenta". Her mother was perfectly capable to transform corn flour, this rather dull staple food of the region, into a whole variety of tasty dishes.

The men did not dare to leave the immediate vicinity. It would have been too easy to detect that Zivko and Mirko were no Italians, given their persisting language problems. The Fascist authorities probably would have them arrested on the spot if their past in the Yugoslav army would have become known. And Rudolf with his strange collection of documents? He wouldn't have gone very far with them, either.

For the women, the weekly trip down to Bibbiena constituted the only diversion in an otherwise uniform schedule. Bertha, Blanka and Zenka went there in turn. By chance, one of the women had found an Italian textbook for Germans at the small book- and magazine-shop.
Regular language lessons were organized in the farmhouse. Zivko and Rudolf tried to provide some basic education for Otto. And Mirko, who was very skilful in these things, helped the farmer with his repairs.

Rudolf had started to read the Bible. Initially he did it because there was no other book available. But then he got interested more and more in the Old Testament and its many fascinating stories.
He recalls how they sat around the table during many long evenings while he tried his best to translate these stories for the rest of the family. Properly speaking these texts, taken from an Italian Bible, were no Torah lectures in a synagogue, of course.
Yet, it was a good opportunity for him, for Blanka and for Otto to become better acquainted with Jewish history and traditions.
And they all liked to be together in a well-heated room and in the cozy light of a kerosene lamp.

A lot of snow fell around mid-January. To Blanka's delight, Rudolf found two pairs of old and primitive skis in one of the stables. The farmer and his son, who was with the Army now, had used them when snowfall blocked the ways and roads. They were allowed to take them and went skiing on the meadows and gentle slopes around the farm.

"All in all, we had a very close and fine family life", Blanka recalled. But then she added: " If it had not been for our constant fears!"
And the reasons to be afraid grew by the week. They were able to overlook the road winding down from the mountain pass and leading to Bibbiena. The military traffic on this road grew in intensity. Both Italian and German trucks were transporting troops and building material as far as they could make out. From time to time these trucks were attacked by low flying allied warplanes.
And there was the very uncomfortable situation of Zivko and Mirko. What if someone denounced them? Fortunately enough this did not happen – but the fear was there, all the time.

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When Blanka stepped out from the bus in the afternoon, Rudolf helped her with the bags she was carrying home from market in Bibbiena. It was a wet and chilly afternoon around mid February 1944.
He kissed her, noticing a strange unrest. "Something wrong?" he smiled. She looked at him with blank eyes. "Something wrong? Rudolf, terrible things are happening down there!"
They took the path to the farmhouse, while Blanka explained what she had seen:
"Bibbiena is full of German soldiers. They are everywhere. And I have seen a kind of military headquarters in the town hall building," she said. " And

another strange thing has happened. There are many workers, trucks and machines around."
"Well, we have seen them coming down the road from Passo di Mondrioli", Rudolf remarked. "Apparently they were going to Bibbiena and not to a place further down in the South."
"Maybe, but there they are." Blanka was still quite excited. " I have asked some people on the market and in a bar. These workers belong to a German outfit called 'Organisation Todt'. They are building a new road and will fortify the pass."
Rudolf was visibly worried. "This could mean that they are building a new defense line right in this area!" he exclaimed. "But even more," Blanka added. "I have heard that the Italian police office has changed hands as well. And the new officers seem to be real Fascist hardliners."

That was bad news, indeed.
Everybody agreed on it when they were discussing matters after dinner. They were surrounded by the enemy in a much more dangerous way then ever before. But there was strictly nothing they could do about it for the moment. Leave Badia Prataglia? This would have been idiotic. Where would they find a more secure place in the middle of a war zone?
No, they had to cope with this new situation. They had to sit it out and keep calm as best as they could.

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And then there were the partisans. Potentially they constituted the greatest danger.
Some weeks ago Italian patriots had built the first partisan units in the area, composed by courageous young people. They hid in secluded strongholds high up in the mountains and started their first, albeit still inconsistent and rather symbolical attacks. During the night they would come down to the villages and ask for food in the farmhouses.
The Selingers and Rudolf were aware of these developments very soon. From time to time the farmer or his wife would get up in the middle of the night to meet with a stranger. The refugees pretended to be deeply asleep, but they knew better.

And then – it must have been in March – Mussolini's people reacted!
During a late afternoon, a detachment of soldiers, armed with sub-machine guns, came to the hamlet where the farmhouse was located. They ordered everybody to come out of the houses and to assemble in the small square.

Rudolf, Blanka and the others had seen the soldiers arriving. They did not know what to do. Never before had they experienced such a situation.
For the first time blank and uncontrollable fear gripped all of them. There was no time for planning and thinking. Sheer panic took over. “That is the end!“ Blanka thought and she believes that everybody thought in the same way. It seemed as if Terror had caught up with them finally.

They held each other by the hands in a desperate search for comfort.

When everybody had arrived in the piazzetta the next order confirmed his or her worst anxieties. An elegant officer with a cold and hard face shouted, waving his weapon: “ Women to the right, men to the left!” This looked dangerously like a typical hold-up, a “rastrellamento”, as the Italians used to call it.
The farmers and the refugees obeyed and took their positions. They all obeyed – with one exception! Mirko, his inborn naiveté still intact, went with the women and hid behind them. Rudolf wanted to hold him back, but it was too late. And then he noted to his stupefaction that his uncle got away with it! He hid so well behind the ladies that nobody noticed him.

The officer, still a rather young man, craned his neck and announced in a shrill voice: “ Some of you have supported the partisans, the sworn enemies of Italy! We do not know who of you has committed such a crime. But all of you will have to bear the consequences!”

Everybody looked around, desperately trying to find a cover or an escape. But there was none. There were just too many soldiers around. The Italians tried to argue with the officer, pleading their innocence. But he would have none of it, and when the atmosphere became too agitated for his taste he had everybody silent again by taking out his pistol and firing two or three shots in the air.
And then an Italian officer took his own fellow countrymen hostage! He picked ten men at random and ordered them to mount a nearby truck. Rudolf had just started to think about this extraordinary development when he noted that Zivko was one of them!
The soldiers and the officers mounted the truck as well and it took the path to Badia Prataglia. “They will be brought to the prison in Bibbiena,” one of the farmers muttered before they all dispersed.

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When the Selingers and Rudolf had gained their farmhouse they were still numb with shock and despair. Nobody was in the mood for dinner. The kerosene lamp was lit and they sat around the table, sighing, moaning and despairing.
Bertha was inconsolable. She sobbed and hung her head. All her inherent strength had gone. “Come on, Bertha, come on. Everything will be fine,” Zenka said in an effort to comfort her sister. But Bertha just shook her head in despair, and everybody knew that she was right.
They were unable to come to grips with the situation, let alone to reach any conclusions. Was there anything they could do to save Zivko? It looked as impossible as to get Daniel out of the lions’ den. Even Rudolf, when asked by the others had no answer at hand.

And then an astonishing thing happened. Blanka got up.
Rudolf thought that she would go to prepare some food. However, Blanka did not leave the room. She had gotten up to ask for the necessary attention.
Her voice was flat and calm, as Rudolf had never heard it.
And then she announced: “I will go to Bibbiena. I will get my father out of the prison.”
The others looked at her incredulously. Of all people – Blanka! Until then she had left practically all the decisions to her husband or to other members of the family. Until then she had scarcely participated in any serious discussion. And now – that?
When Blanka noticed the doubt in the eyes of her family, she repeated: “ It is my father. I will get him out. I will go to Bibbiena tomorrow!” All of a sudden Blanka, a young woman of nineteen years, had become a real grown-up. Nobody dared to argue with her. And even Rudolf knew instinctively that he had to give in. There would be nothing to change her mind.

When he asked her about her plans during the night Blanka had to admit that she hadn’t any. They discussed a little bit, but then Rudolf said:” You will do it!” He took her in his arms, and that was the best thing he could do.
The next morning Blanka put on her best clothes. She asked aunt Zenka for a lipstick and some powder and did her makeup very carefully. She waved everybody good-bye and took the bus to Bibbiena. She didn’t even allow Rudolf to accompany her to the bus stop.

Upon arrival Blanka went to the questura right away. She pushed the bell and was let into the police headquarters. The agent on duty liked very much what he saw. Here was a good-looking young lady smiling at him, beautiful and elegant! And the Italian who can resist to female seduction still has to be born!

When she asked to see the commanding officer the agent said: “He has not arrived yet. But I will give you his private address.”
Blanka thanked the agent and left. She went up the main road, turned left into a quiet street and found the house quite easily. She had to knock at the door repeatedly before a lady in a silken morning – coat opened it.
As it turned out she was the wife of the *commandante.* Blanka was let into the living room where the Italian couple was just enjoying a late and leisurely breakfast.
When she was asked what she wanted Blanka started to tell a story she had made up during the bus ride.
“I have come here for my father’s sake,” she told the Italian couple. And while she was saying it she thought of Zivko and began to cry softly. And then, interrupted by sighs ands sobs, she told the police officer about the poor Croatian family from Korcula island where people like her father never learned to speak Italian in a proper fashion. She explained to him that the family had come to Milan to find work in “this great country of yours” and how they had lost all their belongings in a devastating air raid (which was at least partially correct). She told him that they had gone to Badia Prataglia because they needed a shelter they could afford, and that they wanted to work on the farm as soon as spring would arrive.

Apparently, the officer did not believe one single word. Such a well-dressed lady and “work on the farm”? No way! At the same time he was visibly irritated because his wife, full of compassion had joined Blanka in her sobbing. Let us get over with this charade! he may have thought when he asked her to go on.
Blanka said: “ Believe me, Signor Commandante, neither my father nor anybody else in my family has ever had any contact with partisans. We are people who adhere to law and order. We just want to survive!”

She got up, walked around her chair, sat down again and continued to cry and to plead. The officer’s wife cried and pleaded as well. The officer was fed up with such a behavior, which left him completely helpless. These crazy women! He just wanted to be left in peace and to finish his breakfast.
That is why he cut this melodramatic scene short, announcing: “OK, OK! I will let him go to, just to have my peace!” He went to his writing table, prepared the necessary affidavit, signed and sealed it.
Blanka clasped the hands of the police officer and thanked him wholeheartedly. The women embraced like old friends, and Blanka headed for the prison building. She handed the affidavit over to the warden. Ten minutes later Zivko arrived at the entrance door. Father and daughter hugged and kissed each other. Another small miracle had happened!

They went to a coffee bar since the bus to Badia Prataglia was due for departure only one or two hours later. It was there, right at the counter, that Blanka fainted completely. She had built up an enormous tension, which was released all of a sudden. Zivko and the barman came to her help and poured some cold water over her face. And what the tears had not done yet the water did. The carefully applied makeup was gone.

But then Blanka recovered quickly, helped by the first grappa of her life. When they came back "home" the whole family was greeting them with enormous relief and boundless enthusiasm. What an extraordinary achievement! Blanka had shown better nerves than anybody else. When asked where she found her strength she has no answer – even today. "It had to be done", she says.

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The family had intense discussions during the next two weeks. What should they do next? Badia Prataglia had changed from a peaceful place into a snakes' pit. And Rudolf's parents, whom he had dared to visit in the meantime, had become very restless as well. In Poppi the Germans had already shot Italian hostages as a reprisal against partisan attacks.

Well, more and more their ideas centered on Rome. The Allies were getting closer to the Italian capital. They spared the center of the "Eternal City" from their devastating air raids, due amongst others to the constant interventions of the Pope. And it should be possible to find a suitable hiding place in such a big city.
But how could they possibly get there? The whole area between Arezzo and Rome was full of German and Italian soldiers, let alone the SS and the Gestapo. The risks had become incalculable. This time it was up to Rudolf to take the initiative. "I will find out what is possible," he declared.
Did he make this decision because he felt it absolutely necessary? Or did he do it to impress his wife and to regain the initiative? Anyhow, he made it.

And now it was his turn to go to Bibbiena where he had been only once before, soon after their arrival. Rudolf went to the small railway station and politely inquired about the conditions under which he could use the train to Rome. The railway agent told him that all he needed was a valid ticket and proper documents. When Rudolf produced his papers issued by the Red Cross, the Italian told him bluntly: " That is good enough for normal Italians like me. But the Germans run patrols on practically all the trains nowadays. They might ask a lot of questions. You better get a permit from them as well!

And," he added, "the railway lines may be interrupted. Those air raids have done a lot of harm."

Rudolf was very much in doubt. Should he put his head into the lion's mouth? But then he said to himself:" Since I am here in Bibbiena anyhow - why shouldn't I be capable of a thing Blanka has been capable of?" So much for a little macho-ism.
He went to the command post of the German army and politely asked for the officer in charge.
This man, a lieutenant of the German army, was sitting at a small desk across one corner of the room. He sat in the angle behind it, with a somewhat dirty window to his left and a wall with an army calendar to his right. The photo of the month was showing a smiling soldier in the open turret of his tank, and the days passed had been crossed carefully with a black pencil.
Rudolf addressed the lieutenant in Italian, being sure that his vocabulary and pronunciation would be a lot better than those of his vis-à-vis.
"I don't understand anything of what you say," the German officer remarked. He remained polite, but there was an edge of impatience in his voice. Rudolf had to make the next step into unknown territory. He smiled at the lieutenant and switched to German:

"Excuse me, Sir. I want to travel to Rome with my wife. And we want to know what kind of documents we need for that." "That is a silly question," the officer retorted with some contempt. "Italians need their passport – and a ticket, of course. But tell me: Where did you learn your excellent German?"
"This exactly explains my problem," Rudolf said. He tried hard to appear relaxed and calm. But sweat was running down his spine. "We are not Italians; we are Slovenes. And I have learned my German in Laibach." He chose the German name for Lubljana because he felt that this would suit the lieutenant better.
He gave him the whole story, being bombed in Milan included, and showed him his Red Cross document.

The German looked at it – attentively and with some curiosity. "I have never seen such a document," he said in the end. "Well, it looks good to me. However, you might not always have the time to explain all that."
He looked at Rudolf again. Rudolf would have given one of their gold coins for an opportunity to guess what the officer was thinking.
But then, to his great relief, the lieutenant said: "I will procure you and your wife with a special transit document – just for the trip to Rome and back."
He called his aid, an elderly sergeant and issued the necessary instructions.

When Rudolf wanted to thank the officer, the German had turned his back to him and was looking out of the window. He dismissed him with a brief gesture of his hand. For some reason he did not want to look at Rudolf again.
The sergeant prepared the document, and Rudolf left the office. He was a little shaken by what he had experienced. Yet, everything had gone extremely well.
He had to rush to the stop, because the bus was due at any moment. But there was time enough to buy a flowerpot for his wife.

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A few days later Blanka and Rudolf left Badia Prataglia for the Italian capital. They never made it to Rome, however.
Their trip ended two or three stops after they had changed trains in Arezzo. The tracks had been destroyed by some recent air attacks, which had hit many railway lines south of Florence. Those who wanted to continue with their traveling were invited to take a bus, which would arrive shortly. Rudolf hesitated. Definitely this would be a journey into completely unknown waters! As a consequence they decided to stay in the train, which was returned to Arezzo. Late in the evening they came back to the farmhouse with a mixture of regret and relief.

What the rest of the family did not know: aunt Zenka had written to "Rotter&Melamet" some days earlier. She had explained the situation in Badia Prataglia and Poppi. She had given them both addresses and asked for help. Could "Rotter&Melamet" provide them with a passage to Rome? in reaching Rome.

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Until now the refugees had never met the SS troops with their black uniforms and their hard, uncanny faces.
But then Bertha came back from the weekly shopping trip to Bibbiena. She was quite excited. "Can you imagine?" she exclaimed in a mixture of both joy and fear. "Close to the mountain pass the partisans have attacked trucks transporting troops of a SS-division called "Hermann Göring"! The rumor goes that at least twenty soldiers have been killed!"
The others did not know what to say. On the one hand they admired the courage of the Italian patriots. On the other hand they were sure that the Nazis would react to the challenge in their own murderous way.

This reaction came swiftly and deadly.

When Mirko looked out of the window in the early hours of the next morning he saw three trucks taking the path to the hamlet, loaded with men in gray and black uniforms. “The SS are coming!” he yelled.
Nightmare again!
Rudolf and Otto rushed to a hiding-place they had carefully prepared after the first raid. It was a large, unused chimney in a small building adjacent to the farmhouse. They crept into it and sealed it off with a few old rags. The others were just waiting, crippled with fear.

The SS troopers jumped off the trucks and started to encircle the whole area. They did it very systematically. Mirko's trick with the Italians would not work here.
And then they went from house to house summoning everybody to go to the same small square where the Italian “rastrellamento” had taken place. Only this time, it would be much, much worse.

Everybody had assembled in the “piazzetta” in deep silence. What followed now went very quickly – four or five minutes at best. Yet, to all those present it seemed like a little eternity.

The commanding officer didn’t say a word. He just drew his pistol and looked around him. Still – not a single word! He was just standing there, a dark leather coat over his gray – olive uniform and the black tabs with the infamous SS – symbols on them. The officer was smiling, but it was the smile of death.
He chose ten men at random, about half of all the men present. Zivko and Mirko were not among them. They were ordered to place themselves in front of the chapel’s sidewall and to go down on their knees. The Italians, numb with shock, obeyed. No last words, no last prayer. Before the eyes of their horrified relatives and friends, these ten men were shot at short distance by the SS troopers. Among them was Othello, the teenage son of their neighbors and a very fine young man. Even the fact that he worked with the Germans in the road-building project did not help him. There wasn’t even time for him to explain. They all were Italians, officially friends and allies of the “Greater German Reich”, but the SS didn’t care at all.

It was only when the corpses were lying in their blood, that the officer shouted in German (which, later on, Rudolf had to translate for the villagers): “This will happen to all traitors! Ten Italians for one German soldier killed!” And then the trucks left as swiftly as they had come. The killers were already looking for their next victims.

The survivors remained in a state of complete, numb stupefaction. Empty eyes looked at the dead in their puddles of blood and at the strange pattern at the wall of the chapel, which the bullets had left.
In the end, an old man moved forward very slowly, approached the corpses and examined them.
“They are all dead,” he declared with a barely audible voice. The other men, amongst them Zivko and Mirko as well as Rudolf and Otto, who had come out of their hiding-place, took the bodies by their feet and their shoulders and laid them on the floor of the chapel.

The people of Badia Prataglia had heard the shots and guessed what must have happened. Many of them came running down the path to the hamlet. And then the spell of utter horror gave room to the spell of utter grief.
The mothers, the wives, the sisters and the children of the dead were wailing desperately. Some of them fainted; some others wanted to throw themselves over the dead bodies and had to be held back.
People came with blankets to cover the mortal remains of the victims. And all of a sudden, there were flowers everywhere over those blankets. The priest arrived, visibly shaken. He was just capable to silently console the families and to say the Lord’s Prayer for the dead.

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When the ten victims were laid to eternal rest in the afternoon, practically all the inhabitants of Badia Prataglia came out to honor them. There was no solemn music, just a brief sermon by the priest and a common prayer. The refugees joined the funeral service. Somehow they wanted to express their deep solidarity with their Italian hosts. But somehow they wanted to express their gratitude that they had been spared, too.

And when they looked at their Italian neighbors they were deeply impressed by the quiet resolve in all the faces. The eyes, which had been dead after witnessing the unthinkable, were filled with a glowing fire and a deep inner resolve. These people would not forget for a very, very long time!

Escape

The next days went by without a major event. There still was a lot of military traffic on the main road. The construction teams were busy, and so were the

warplanes of the Allies, which zeroed in and created havoc. But their area was not hit and the SS did not come back to Badia Prataglia for the moment.
Bertha and Blanka had stopped their weekly visits to Bibbiena; an Italian neighbor had offered to do the shopping for them. She was working in town and had to go there anyway.
In the evenings they drew the wooden roller blinds to avoid any unnecessary attention. They continued their evening travels through the Old Testament or played card games.

And that is what they were doing when someone knocked on their door. It was past eleven o'clock – in the middle of the night!
They were gripped by fear once again. Had they been denounced?
Someone turned the kerosene lamp off and everybody kept a terrified silence.
Another knock on the door, and then their visitor said in a broken Croatian: " Open, please! It's me, Rotter!"
Otto opened the door hesitatingly. In the deep darkness he wouldn't have recognized him even if he had known him. But then Zenka lit the lamp again, looked at the door and said quietly:" Let him in. I have asked him to come".

Rotter helped himself out of his coat and looked at some absolutely stupefied faces. When the first surprise had subsided they asked him to have a seat and a glass of wine.
Many questions were asked, and Zenka remained with red ears because she had spoken to no one about her letter.
Rotter sat there, smiling and relaxed. "Well, let us not quarrel about spilled milk," he laughed. "I agree that this letter was potentially very dangerous because it gave away your address here and that of the Kandels in Poppi. But now I have come to bring you to Rome. And the Kandels probably are there already. By the way", he added," Zenka has done absolutely right. The area around Arezzo is getting really dangerous. The Germans are definitely preparing new defense lines around here and the SS gangsters have doubled their efforts to hunt down all the Jews. There is almost nothing the Italians authorities can do about it. Most of the time they aren't even asked or informed".

As it turned out "Rotter&Melamet" had once again planned the escape very carefully. Since Rotter refused to give away his sources of information not much was to be learned about the details.
Anyhow, Melamet had gone to Rome and organized a car with a driver, which served as a taxi. If all had gone well, he had reached Poppi and was taking Mavro, Cecilia and Ruzha to Rome. This scheme was very expensive, but Rotter was certain that it was worth its price.

He gave them the Rome address of the Kandels.

A lot of questions were asked again and again. And they had to decide whether to stay or to go to the Italian capital. In the end it turned out that Mirko and Zenka, in spite of her letter, did not want to go to Rome. For their likings, it was too close to the war. Since Rotter would go back to Milan the next day they asked him if they could come with him. Rotter agreed.
As far as Bertha, Zivko, Blanka, Rudolf and Otto were concerned, they decided to leave. They were told to be on the main road by seven o'clock in the morning. A convoy of military trucks, manned by Slovak soldiers, would come down from the mountain pass. These trucks were bound for Rome. Rotter had bribed the commanding officer. This man would take care of them. Rotter would be on the spot to supervise the operation.

A lot of money and some jewels changed hand. And then Rotter disappeared as he had come: A black shadow in the equally black night.

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The next morning a strange, small procession walked down the main road of Badia Prataglia and stopped close to the last house on the road to Bibbiena. Three men and two women, all in winter coats, hats or caps on their heads, carrying heavy suitcases. They did not look around. And when they stopped, another man, dressed in an elegant trench coat, appeared from nowhere and joined them. The dial on the clock of the church tower was showing seven o'clock exactly.
Rotter calmed the agitated spirits. He greeted them with a big smile and announced reassuringly:" Don't be afraid. The trucks will arrive at any moment. And hide yourselves behind the house in the meantime!"

Some twenty minutes later a deep rumbling filled the street. And then – around a bend – three military trucks came closer. The Slovaks had arrived! Rotter waved at them and they stopped. An officer climbed out of the driver's cab and joined him. The account was settled in silence.

Rudolf and Rotter shook hands. He and the rest of the group climbed on the second truck where a small space had been prepared for them. They stowed their belongings away and sat down on the floor. And then the trucks took off quickly in a southerly direction.

The rules of passage were very simple. The soldiers on the truck shared their food and water with the refugees. Whenever they met other troops on the road or had to wait for the repair teams to clear the road from debris a big

blanket was thrown over the whole group. The roads were bad and jammed with traffic.
From time to time the convoy stopped in the countryside or a forest. Everybody was allowed to care for his or her most immediate needs.

When Rudolf came back after one of these stops his Rolleiflex had gone! He had bought this wonderful camera from the proceeds of the Lucca operation. The Rollei was his only valuable possession left and he was furious. But when he looked into the stern faces of the soldiers he knew better than to start a quarrel. The risks of being denounced or simply being thrown out of the truck were too big.

It took the Slovaks the whole night to reach Rome. Finally, the trucks gained the center of the city. Rudolf and Blanka, together with the others, were let out in the middle of Via Veneto on April 6th, at six o'clock in the morning.

(Final Status before linguistic control: February,2002)

ROME – THE (PROVISIONAL) END OF THE ODYSSEY

A strange hiding place

The street where the trucks had stopped was wide and beautiful. It was edged by overhanging trees, elegant villas painted in pastel colors and huge, stately buildings. There were a few sidewalk cafés and some kiosks as well. What a strange hiding place! Rudolf thought, when he was peeping from under the tarpaulin.
The Slovaks helped them descend from the truck, and the officer said with a broad smile:
"Welcome to the world-famous Via Veneto! You will find your lodging right across the street – compliments of Mister Rotter. It is called Pensione Zanella". He waved them good-bye and the trucks sped around the next bend.

The refugees shook the fatigue out of their legs, collected their luggage and crossed the deserted street as hurriedly as they could. The doorplate of an old and dignified house said "Pensione Zanella".
Since it was very early in the morning the door was closed and all the shutters were down. Otto rang the bell, and Rudolf looked around cautiously. When his eyes fell on a big building right across the street he wiped his eyes as if he had just awakened from a dream.
What was that, for Heaven's sake! This building was decorated with many swastika flags, military version, and two soldiers stood guard in front of their sentry boxes!

Before he could draw the attention of his family to this shocking sight, the door of the boarding house was opened. A sleepy man, still in his pajamas and visibly annoyed, let them in. "Mister Rotter is sending us," Blanka said in a meek voice and with her sweetest smile.
"Ah, our Signor Rotter," replied the night porter, "he sends his guests very early. Well, welcome to Pensione Zanella". When he had closed the door behind them, Rudolf asked him quite breathlessly: " What is this building across the street?" The porter laughed and asked: " But haven't you been told? This is Albergo Flora, which serves as the headquarters of the German army nowadays! And the Hotel Excelsior right next to it is the favorite place for all sorts of visiting dignitaries ".
"But this is absurd!" Rudolf exclaimed. "Not at all," replied the porter. "Who on earth would suspect refugees to hide right in the shade of the swastika? This is perhaps the safest spot for you in all of Rome! And if you don't believe me – ask the other families, which are here already for quite a while. Come on, I will show you your rooms and then I will prepare a good espresso coffee for everybody. I have to wake up myself".
And with these words he shuffled away and left them with their total bewilderment.

When the first surprise had subsided and some thinking had been done, they all smiled. After all – Rotter's choice had not been bad at all! Indeed, who would look for them at such a spot?
They rented two small rooms, one for the women, another one for the men. There was but one bathroom for all of them, without a tub and with a decrepit shower. Everything looked absolutely crowded after they had unpacked. But nobody really cared. They were safe – for the time being. And it promised to be a rather short stay anyway. It couldn't last long until the Allied reached the Italian capital!
Blanka recalls:"It was a strange feeling. We knew that we had come as refugees. But we felt like tourists to some extent. Such was the spell of Rome!"

Later on in the morning a regular breakfast was served in the dining room. One after another the other guests of Pensione Zanella arrived. When the necessary presentations had been done it turned out that almost all of them were refugees of one kind or another.
After a few days and the buildup of the intimacy typical for a group of people crowded into such a limited space they would find out that most of them were Jewish as well. There was a family from Osijek in Croatia, another one from the South of France and a couple, which had fled Austria already five years ago.
Those who had already spent some time in Rome would teach the newly arrived some simple rules of survival. They knew the best hours for leaving the boarding house and to mix with the crowd on Via Veneto. They knew when it was more or less quiet at the German headquarters. They knew some shopkeepers who would not ask unnecessary questions. They knew all the tram and bus connections, which would allow you to explore the Eternal City a little bit.

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"Thank God! You have made it to Rome as well!"
Cecilia was perfectly happy when she embraced her son. Mavro was smiling, and aunt Ruzha waved from the door of the tiny kitchen.
"I am glad as well that we have made it. Ruzha, could I have a big pot of coffee?"
As soon as they had arrived in "Pensione Zanella", had unpacked their few belongings and had their breakfast, Rudolf tried to get into contact with his parents and aunt Ruzha. Unfortunately he did not know at all where they had landed definitely. Sure, Rotter had provided him with the address of a

boarding house, but when he made a phone call there the Kandels had already moved without leaving their new whereabouts.

But since Melamet knew about their boarding house he had provided Mavro with the address of "Pensione Zanella" when he had escorted them to Rome. And only two days after his arrival Rudolf got a letter from his mother. They were alive and well and lived now at Via della Lega Lombarda, 28. When he went to visit them it turned out that their small, but very comfortable apartment was located in a quiet and stately area north of the center of the city.

"But tell me, why didn't 'Rotter&Melamet' lodge you at our boarding house as well?" Rudolf asked. Ruzha had brought a big pot of coffee, and they were sitting on a small balcony, telling each other about the latest happenings.
"The reason is very simple," his father replied. "There was not enough space for all of us. And that is why we moved elsewhere."
They chatted for an hour or so, but then Rudolf had to go. He arranged a weekly meeting with his parents, always on Friday evenings. It was meant to be a kind of secular Shabbat eve – quite like in the good old times in Zagreb.

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The next thing Blanka and Rudolf did was to explore Rome and the marvels of the "Eternal City".
They chose the quiet hours of the early mornings to look at the antiquities and the palaces and to visit the churches. They became acquainted with the Coliseum, the Castel S. Angelo and the Forum Romanum, with San Giovanni in Lateran and Santa Maria Maggiore, with the Fontana di Trevi and the Thermae of Caracalla. And on a beautiful Sunday they mixed with the crowds, took a bus ant went to see Emperor Traian's villa in Tivoli.

One sunny morning Rudolf and Blanka even went to St. Peter's Square. They wanted to watch the Pope blessing the crowd. The two Jews were listening silently to the shouts of admiration, the common prayers and the songs. They were looking at a distant, small man clad in white who was standing at a window on the upper floors of the Vatican Palace. And when Pius XII blessed the thousands gathered in front of him they noticed with amazement what an impact this gesture had on the Italians, the representatives of their host nation.
"Well," said Rudolf pensively while they were leaving the immense arena called 'Piazza San Pietro'," we will have to do without such a blessing. We will have to walk alone. Who knows, there might be something going for religious

feelings after all".
Blanka watched him with an amused smile. "Wait a minute, Rudolf," she said, " you will not become a religious man in the end, will you?" Rudolf smiled as well: "Definitely not, even if I might miss something. And, by the way, you know that crowds make me sick – even Catholic ones!"
He took her hand tenderly. They would walk alone, but their love would guide them.

During the early evenings they usually did what Rudolf recalls as the "Via Veneto promenade": Half an hour or so in the middle of the crowds, a tasty cappuccino in one of the sidewalk cafés and then back "home". A small bar on nearby Piazza Argentina or a movie theater were welcome alternatives from time to time.
They avoided any regular contact with other people, but the company in Pensione Zanella, where they took all their meals, was interesting enough. Endless hours were spent chatting or playing cards. Rudolf started to take chess seriously. Until now he had played it for fun only. One of the refugees, the Austrian, was a very good teacher. He must have spent endless hours in the Vienna's chess cafés. Well, Rudolf was an excellent student, and he still remembers his first draw with particular pride.

Blanka's father who did not leave the house at all liked to watch across the street from behind drawn blinds. As it seemed to him the Germans got more agitated and nervous by the day. Small wonder since the Allies started slowly to close in on Rome, as BBC and the typically Italian grapevine told everybody in town.
There were rumors about German atrocities committed against Italians. But there were no hard facts. No wonder, since even the mass killings at the Fosse Ardeatine had been kept a secret to a large extent.

All in all, everything appeared to be fine. Daily life ran its quiet course. Yet, Rudolf and Blanka were worried by her parents. Bertha and Zivko became increasingly nervous. They were just not capable to cope with the massive German presence across the street. They could stand neither the swastika flags, nor the impassive posture of the soldiers standing guard, nor the hard and taut faces of the officers as they were coming and leaving headquarters. And they were constantly afraid that something might go terribly wrong

One evening in early May Zivko addressed them after dinner. "We should get out of here," he implored his family. " Bertha and I are nervous and really scared. Rotter's scheme is fine theoretically. But what if one of the sentries gets suspicious? They are staring right at us all the time. What if the Allies

bomb the headquarters of their mortal enemies and we are hit by inadvertence?"

The opinions in the small group were divided. Rudolf and Otto were not afraid at all. They had arranged themselves with the situation quite well. Why another move – now, that the Allies could liberate Rome any day? Blanka was undecided. On the one hand she shared her husband's arguments. On the other hand she didn't want to see her parents suffer.
In the end everybody rallied to Zivko's standpoint – out of conviction, of commiseration or of love. Rudolf remembered that, during a recent visit, his parents had told him about some apartments, which were still to be found in their area of the city. A shop owner had told them when they went to buy their newspaper.
Rudolf went to see this man on the next Friday afternoon before visiting Cecilia and Mavro. The Italian scratched his baldhead and said:"Come back tomorrow evening, please". When Rudolf showed up at the pre-arranged time, the shop owner greeted him with a friendly grin: "Here is the address of a widow who is prepared to sublet part of her apartment". Rudolf took the note, thanked the man and gave him a nice tip.

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They were packing once more.
And over their last dinner at "Pensione Zanella" Blanka said: "When will these errantries be finally over? Last night I have made a count because I was lying awake. Since we have left Zagreb – and that is only three years ago - I have lived at more than ten different addresses! Whenever will we find some rest? Rudolf and me – when will we be able to live together like a real couple?"
Bertha rebuked her in a harsh voice, which they hadn't heard for months. "What are you complaining about? We have survived in a period where many millions of Jews, Serbs, Russians, Poles and other people have been killed brutally! And we will have survived the Nazi terror in a few days or weeks. And then you can enjoy peace and your husband. Please stop complaining!"
She was right, of course. But what she could not know – it would take another year until a "home" would become a home for Blanka and Rudolf.

Awaiting liberation

Spring was giving a strong performance when they left "Pensione Zanella" in the early hours of a gorgeous day. The sun was shining brilliantly; the fresh

green leaves on the trees bordering Via Veneto were ruffled slightly by the cool morning breeze. The skies were blue, and a serene calm reigned over Rome.
Even the Nazi persecutors were still asleep.
And when they boarded the tram filled with blue-collar workers nobody took notice of a lonely group of five people carrying too much luggage for this hour of the day.

"Daniela Bernasconi, 94, Via Ruggiero Fauro" – that was what the shop owner's note had said. And there it was, a quiet, nondescript house in a quiet, nondescript street. Only the cheerful sound of a Neapolitan song in the radio interrupted the early morning silence. An open window on the ground floor indicated that the Signora was an early riser. She saw them coming and opened the door.

Daniela Bernasconi or "Nelli", as they would call her before very long, was about forty-five years old. She had a rather narrow forehead, a small and inquisitive nose and her mouth was a shade too wide. Here eyes were gray-blue with flecks of gold in them. She had a nice smile. She looked as if she had slept well. It was a nice face, a face you get to like.
"Come in," she said, " and feel comfortable". When they all were sitting around the kitchen table, her new landlady came to the point right away. She laid out the conditions: " I don't want to know who you are and I will not ask you for any identification papers. But, as you well know, it can be very dangerous for an Italian to house unknown people these days. Who knows, you might even be refugees or something of the kind. These damned Nazis and Fascists would make short work of me if they found out about you". She laid out the conditions but she did it in a way that was perfectly acceptable.

Daniela poured some tea from a big tin pot. When everybody had his cup filled she continued: " Three weeks ago two ladies who lived here were arrested by the police right around the corner – in the park of Villa Borghese. They could not show any piece of identification. I have not seen them again since then. Apparently, they have not given away their address, and our police do not torture people, thank God." She helped herself with some more tea.
"However, be very careful," she added, " and don't give away this address. Furthermore, I would ask you to pay your rent in advance and in hard currency, if possible. And please, call me Nelli".

Rudolf was set back. He liked "Nelli" from the outset; but why hadn't they

remained in “Pensione Zanella”? Circumstances did not look very encouraging up here. But then – the decision had been made.
And it would have been too risky anyhow to travel back to Via Veneto in broad daylight.
The refugees were short on cash. Fortunately, Daniela accepted two gold coins as monthly rent after a short discussion. She showed them to their rooms, which were a bit more comfortable than at their previous hiding place. And when they looked out of the window there were no swastika flags and no German soldiers – just a quiet street with nobody around.

The landlady’s warnings had an immediate effect on Blanka, Rudolf and the others. How imprudent they had been during the previous weeks! They decided that from now on they would leave the house only in a case of real emergency. It did not make any sense to run risks anymore. Liberation seemed only days away!
Bertha asked Daniela to do all the shopping. There was not much more to buy anyhow. Rome’s food supply had been severely curtailed during these last weeks of German occupation. There was hardly any fish or meat to be found. The scanty diet was based on bread, pasta, risotto and a few vegetables. Thank God fresh herbs and tomatoes were still available. With these ingredients you can transform any staple food into a tasty dish!

Once in a while some fruit was to be had. There was tea and water; coffee or wine had to wait for better times. As Daniela told them, even the espresso bars had run out of fresh supplies, which added greatly to the feeling of general discomfort in Rome.

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It was hard for young and curious people like Rudolf, Blanka and Otto to find themselves restricted to Via Ruggiero Fauro. Late spring was out with all its charms. They heard the birds singing and imagined how great it would be to stroll in the gardens of Villa Borghese. They saw people walking by and imagined how nice it would be to mix with the crowds on Via Veneto. The telephone had to be avoided because it might have been tapped.
Radio had become their only source of information and entertainment. At least, they were consoled by the fact that the Germans and their pawns were retreating on all fronts. The rest was the customary routine: lessons for Otto, practicing Italian, listening to music in the radio….

And then Blanka's parents caught a severe influenza from out of the blue. There was no way to arrange a contact with a doctor. Daniela's doctor was very good; but he was a Fascist and his visit could end in disaster. As a consequence, recovery was painfully slow since both Bertha and Zivko were exhausted by the unending strain of the last years.
The only one to leave the house once a week was Rudolf. He did not want to take unnecessary risks, either. But he simply had to see his parents whose health conditions were rather shaky as well. The long period of exile was taking its toll. Fortunately enough, spring and early summer of 1944 were rather cool so that nobody had to suffer from the proverbial Roman heat waves.

One sunny evening, when he was walking home from Via della Lega Lombarda Rudolf witnessed a strange scene. It rained small sheets of paper from the darkening sky!
Rudolf looked up and noticed two or three airplanes, which were circling quietly at high altitude. The evening sun transformed their hulks into a brilliant silvery white – almost like the silhouettes of swans or seagulls.
He looked around with great care. To be found in possession of an Allied pamphlet could resort in immediate execution. Since he was alone in the street he bent down and picked up one of the leaflets. He hid in a doorway and read it. It said – as far as Rudolf can remember -:
"Citizens of Rome! The day of liberation is near! Our victorious forces should enter the city in two or three days.
The armed units of our enemies can no longer muster any serious resistance in the area. But be careful! They are still strong enough to commit crimes against Italian citizens and foreigners alike. Stay inside your houses and wait for our arrival!"

Rudolf ran home as quickly as he could. He rushed upstairs and yelled: " Come here, immediately!" And then he read out the text of the pamphlet. Everybody was thrilled and jubilant, "Nelli" included. Finally – the days of liberty and revenge had come!
Later in the evening, Daniela turned the radio on. She searched for the program of the Fascists. She laughed and exclaimed jokingly: "This might be the last opportunity to listen to their propaganda!" And when the announcer of the late evening news talked about the "heroic resistance of our soldiers in the area of Civitavecchia and Tivoli" they knew that they would not have to wait much longer.
This happened on June 2nd, 1944.

On June 4th the shrill ringing of the telephone interrupted the breakfast at Via Ruggiero Fauro. Daniela put up the receiver and listened breathlessly. From time to time she asked "Where?" or "When?" or "Wonderful!" It all ended with a repeated "Ciao! Ciao! Come and see us as quickly as possible!"

Daniela turned around. Her eyes were glittering with tears of joy. "That was Signor Lederer, a friend of yours. As you have told me he is hiding in the San Paolo area, south of the city center. The Americans are there – with tanks, artillery and many, many soldiers! The Germans are leaving our city northwards. They do not fight back at all. What a day! What a marvelous day!"
A small pandemonium broke lose. They were all singing, shouting, crying and kissing each other. Otto grabbed Blanka, danced around with her and shouted: "Let's go out and watch! I want to see it!" The others were a little more cautious. It could take some hours until the Allies had arrived in the northern parts of Rome. And who knew what the SS and other killers were capable to do before they fled?
They had waited for so long. Why go out and risk their lives – now, when liberation was so near?

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But then, Rudolf and Blanka could not resist much longer, either. They simply wanted to be there when it all happened! In a unique mixture of enthusiasm, curiosity and shear motorial energy they left the house.

There were many people in the streets already. Nobody was able to hide his or her enthusiasm. Some were waving old Italian flags. A small office building around the corner was burning. It could have been a stronghold of the Fascist "Camicie Nere" – but nobody cared anymore. The flames of the building were like a funeral pile of the old, odious system.
And as it happens in similar circumstances people started shouting: "All to Viale dei Parioli! That is where the Germans are leaving! That is were the Americans should be coming!" The crowd started to run. Rudolf, Blanka and Otto ran with them. This promised to be a spectacle like they had never seen one before!

Viale dei Parioli is a large boulevard bordered by stately old pine trees. It serves as one of the main arteries linking Rome with the North of the country. When they arrived there, together with hundreds of other people, Rudolf and Blanka watched the first German units leaving town.

The officers in their halftracks and the Military Police on their motorcycles tried hard to make it look like an orderly exit. But you only had to look at the tired, nervous faces of the soldiers to know what it really was: A narrow escape in full swing! However, basic discipline was maintained and there was no shooting or other act of last-minute barbarism.
The Germans ran the gauntlet, and the Italians let it happen with great discipline and in almost complete silence. Right next to Rudolf a man spat on the floor. And he said: "Putane, andate per sempre!" Rudolf knew what that meant. The "whores" were going forever.

And Blanka remembered the day, more than three years ago, when the same army had entered Zagreb with a lot of pomp and circumstance. And now – that! There were no more swastika flags, not even on the officers' cars. There was no military music, but there was a group of Italians singing softly " Va, pensiero…", the extraordinary chorus of the inmates from Verdi's "Nabucco", which had served as an unofficial national anthem for quite a while. Rudolf thinks that he has seen some Slovak trucks in the caravan. But he is not quite sure.

Behind the army came quite a number of cars filled with frightened civilians and SS-people staring ahead without any visible emotion. The rats – Nazi bureaucrats and their families, profiteers and diplomats - were leaving the sinking vessel.

When the Germans had disappeared behind the trees at the next bend of the boulevard, a complete silence reigned on Viale dei Parioli.
It was as if Rome were holding its breath. It was a moment of utter shock, ultimate blessing and boundless anticipation. Everybody tried to come to grips with this moment, to understand what was going on. Nobody succeeded. Only the birds kept singing. They couldn't care less.

And then, only some twenty minutes later, a low grumbling noise was to be heard in the distance.

1944 (after the Liberation of Rome)

Germany

On June 6th American, British and Canadian forces land on the beaches of Normandy. The invasion has begun. The SS kill 642 citizens of Oradour-sur-Glane as a reprisal against the French resistance movement. In July, Caen is liberated. Nantes, Angers, other cities and the Côte d'Azur follow in August. Paris is liberated on August 25th in an explosion of popular enthusiasm. Belgium and Luxemburg follow in September. Shortly afterwards, American forces cross the German border for the first time. French troops liberate Strasbourg in November.

On July 20th an attempt to assassinate Hitler fails. Nearly all the conspirators are killed in the weeks and months to come. After the war Count Stauffenberg and many others will become symbols of the German resistance.

In Poland, Russian troops conquer Lublin, Brest-Litowsk and Przemysl. They cross the German border in August.

The Polish underground army starts a military uprising in Warsaw. After a heroic fight, these Polish forces have to surrender in early October. There are uprisings in Slovakia. Rumania severs all relations with Germany and declares war in the summer. The Red Army occupies Bucharest and Sofia.

Italy

Allied forces liberate Civitavecchia, Elba, and Perugia in June. Siena, Leghorn, Ancona, Pisa follow in July, Florence in August. Greek forces occupy Rimini in September. Ravenna is taken in December.

Yugoslavia

Josip Broz Tito, the almost undisputed leader of the Yugoslav resistance meets Churchill in Naples. Shortly afterwards King Peter II. forces Draza Mihajlovic, the leader of the Royalist partisans, to resign. Tito remains the only leader of the Yugoslav liberation army.

His forces, assisted by Russian units occupy Belgrade in October.

The Jewish People

Russian troops liberate the Majdanek extermination camp in July. 4.000 Gypsies are murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Their part of the camp's barracks is destroyed afterwards.

In August the Jewish Agency implores the US forces to bomb the concentration camps and Auschwitz in particular. Undersecretary of State John McCloy refuses, citing potential acts of retaliation of the Germans. Inmates of Auschwitz start an uprising in October. They try to blow up the gas chambers and the crematoriums. The SS guards kill all of them. Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS orders all the crematoriums to be destroyed in November. Killing by gas starts in the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

Here come the Americans!

The grumbling grew louder. And then – with thousands of eyes fixed on it – an olive-green monster turned around the corner, cautiously and slowly. It was a tank and it was not a German one. "A Patton," Otto whispered raptly. He had studied the pictures in the magazines quite well. The turret was closed. The machine guns and the cannon swept around searchingly and menacingly, ready to hit.

But there were no more enemies in sight, only civilians gasping for breath. As soon as the tank commander had gained certainty about the situation he advanced some fifty yards and stopped. Five more tanks followed. They all had white stars painted on the flanks of the turret. The Americans had arrived! To Blanka and Rudolf these tanks seemed like the vehicles of heavenly messengers – and they were not alone.
All of a sudden, the silence of the crowd broke and gave away to a hilarious, deafening jubilation. People jumped into the air, embraced and kissed each other indiscriminately, shouted, waved with their Italian flags and their handkerchiefs, cried and laughed.

Blanka remembers Rudolf shouting at the top of his voice: "We have made it! We have made it! My God, we have made it!" Three years of persecution and humiliation had vanished in this silence of a few minutes. They had achieved their ultimate goal: Survival!

The tank of the platoon – leader stopped again when it arrived at the center of Viale dei Parioli. The hatch of the turret was opened from within slowly and carefully. The soldier's instincts were still intact.
And then a big black face appeared – all in smiles. The big black face belonged to a big black man. But even young Otto lost his apprehension when he saw the broad smile. There was nothing to be afraid of. These people had come to liberate them, he thought happily. They were friends and everything would be fine from now on!

The tank commander waved and the crowd waved back enthusiastically.
The hatches of the other tanks opened as well. More soldiers appeared with smiling faces. And then the Americans did what has been described in so many stories all around Europe: They threw candies, chewing-gum and chocolate in the direction of the children who had come out with their parents. It was like at a carnival parade - the most magnificent carnival of everybody's

Lifetime.
A young mother ran to one of the tanks, raised her little daughter and made her shake hands with the commander. An old gentleman who had come in his best suit raised his walking stick and shouted with his thin voice:"Evviva l'Italia, evviva l'America!" And Blanka hugged an Italian housewife whom she had never seen before. She just had to show her how happy she was.

Next came some halftracks with heavy machine guns, and then came the infantrymen. They had formed two long columns, one on the right side of Viale dei Parioli and a second one on the left. In such a way the soldiers could hope to find some shade under the trees.
It was not very warm during Liberation Day. But for the infantrymen, with their helmets, their rifles, their ammunition and their knapsacks even seventy degrees were enough to make them sweat profusely. They looked completely worn out. The Italians tried to cheer them up as if they were marathon runners attacking the last mile of a very long run.
The soldiers barely reacted. And the only thing they would accept was water. They didn't carry any candies for the children, either. A few of them practically fell asleep while walking; they had to be supported by more robust comrades. Apparently, the American forces had received the order to secure the northern outskirts of Rome before they were offered some rest.
The supply trucks and the field-kitchens would arrive only much, much later.

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Blanka, Rudolf and Otto went back to their small apartment. Their heads, hearts and minds were full with impressions. After their arrival they had to give a full account of the unbelievable events, which had happened on the boulevard during the last two hours.
In the late afternoon Daniela laid out a satin tablecloth, fitting serviettes and some fine silver cutlery. "Part of my dowry," she proudly explained. She had procured some vegetables from a neighbor and a big salami from nowhere. She had gone to the basement and had come back with two bottles of red wine.
"We will have a real party tonight," she announced. "The big liberation party," Bertha added with a happy smile. And when time had come, she helped Daniela to prepare a huge pot of spaghetti together with a magnificent sauce of tomatoes, garlic and olive oil. Rudolf had rushed to his parents' apartment. He came back with Cecilia, Mavro and Ruzha, some cheese and another bottle of wine.

They turned the radio on, but the Italian programs and Radio Vatican were gone.
Apparently, all the technicians had stayed at home to celebrate a historic day. When BBC announced the withdrawal of the Germans and the arrival of the Allied forces, they all cheered again although they knew it already.

It was official now and the whole world would know it! The glasses were raised – everybody had his share on this evening – and for the first time in long weeks a loud "Lechaim!" filled their hearts.
Bertha offered a toast to her children. "You cannot imagine how happy I am that you have survived," she said under tears. "I have been worried for more than three years now. I have watched you growing up and becoming adult and independent people. Yet, a mother never stops to worry about their children."
And then she reached into her pockets and got out one of her wonderful golden broaches with a couple of small diamonds fixed on it. "My mother-in-law has given it to me as her wedding present," she added. "Now, it will be my belated present for Blanka's wedding. As you know, I have kept it with me as a piece of last resort. But such a precaution is no longer necessary".
During dinner Daniela asked Rudolf to tell her about what had happened to them over the last years. Rudolf obliged happily. He was interrupted by the family, by frequent toasts and some wonderful swing music BBC had put on to contribute to the celebration.

When he had ended Daniela sighed and remarked: "What a terrible time you must have had! Thank God that it is over!" The consensus on that was complete and immediate.

Rudolf accompanied his parents and aunt Ruzha to their house. When he came back, everybody had fallen asleep. Well, even wonderful events can be exhausting, he thought, and went to bed as well.

The Morning After

All the calendar did was to move one day ahead. The same sun was shining and the same birds were singing. But a lot of things had become different from this June 5th, 1944 onward. Yet, it was too early for a mental let-off. Excitement still was running high.

Daniela had been able to buy some eggs and some tea on the black market, which developed with great speed as it does in all areas of the world in similar circumstances.
These acquisitions made the common breakfast, to which they had invited Rudolf's folks as well, quite a luxurious event. But nothing was more beautiful than the wonderful feeling to be free again!

Strictly speaking, they had not been prisoners during their stay in Rome. But the voluntary confinement in both Via Ruggiero Fauro and in Via della Lega Lombarda had been felt harshly. That is why the next reaction was all too natural: Let's go downtown!
The whole group pushed hard to get into an already crowded tram to Corso d'Italia. It was another truly unbelievable day! There were smiling faces all over the place, flags, flowers, music, GI's dancing merrily with Italian women and girls.
When they had reached Via Veneto the radios from all the coffee bars were playing Glen Miller songs, and Blanka got fidgety feet. She invited Rudolf to a dance on the boardwalk right in front of old "Pensione Zanella". No sentries, no swastika flags, and no hard faces anymore – life can be wonderful!
That night, they went to bed very late.

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After a few days enthusiasm and hilarity subsided to some extent. The extreme tension with which they all had to live during the last years gave way to an understandable exhaustion, even to some phlegm. And when they had recovered a little bit they found out very quickly that life still was anything but normal.

It was Mavro then who took the initiative. He invited all of them to an old inn in Trastevere. They had never been there before and enjoyed the narrow, colorful streets with the many restaurants, which had all reopened during the last few days.
The first Italian singers had come back as well with their powerful albeit untrained tenor voices and their guitars. The refugees found a table in a small "trattoria". And when the pasta was eaten and the wine was drunk, Mavro got up for a short speech. Rudolf remembers that the substance of it roughly went like this:

"My beloved ones, dearest friends! In a strange way a strange party is over. Fate has drawn us together like water is drawn together in a funnel. We have

lived through an absolutely unbelievable period. Events have unfolded with extreme speed.
And those of our two families who have made it to Italy have survived. This is nothing but a miracle. Fate has been extremely favorable to us in spite of our sufferings. But around us many thousands, probably millions of our Jewish brothers and sisters have died. I do not know what has happened to my sister Lina in Prague. The Nazis are still taking it out on innocent people there..."

Everybody around the table was extremely touched by Mavro's words. Everybody thought about those whom they were still missing.
Bertha interrupted sobbing: "And what has become of my mother? We have not heard from her for more than a year now. Think of Zenka and Mirko, or of my other sister Böshka and her husband Paul. How safe is Milan now?" Zivko added: "And what about Egon Polak who has been incarcerated by the Ustasha?".... Same as the Steiners, our dear friends, and so many others," Mavro went on. "But now, this gigantic funnel called war and persecution, is spitting us out into reality – in all directions".

"Never!", Blanka shouted, " we will all stay together, wait until the war is over and return to Zagreb!"
"No, no," Mavro replied sadly. "I understand you very well. But let us not be naïve - things simply don't happen in such a way. Well – for the next future we will have to organize ourselves here in Rome. But then – who knows?"
No wonder that they went home in a subdued mood, in spite of all the charms of Trastevere. They knew that Mavro was not wrong

During the next days and weeks many plans were made and discarded. And their finances were getting worse all the time. There still were some gold coins left as well as a little money, but this was not good enough to sustain them for a prolonged period. They had to look for some ways to earn their lives again!

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Blanka was the first one to find a job. Rumors in town had it that the Allies needed local staff for their administration. Blanka reacted swiftly. She went down to Piazza Barberini. The Allied Control Commission had taken over a big building there, which had accommodated the headquarters of Mussolini's Air Force until recently.
Blanka put up her proverbial smile, presented herself at the reception desk and was admitted to an interview. With her good looks and a basic knowledge of several languages she was ideally suited to work at that same desk.

Blanka got the job, a good salary and access to the APEX store where the Americans did their shopping.

Of course, she came home as proud as a peacock.

Shortly afterwards Zivko started to work as an accountant in Cinecittà, the center of Italian movie making. Astonishingly enough the movie industry had not been not too much affected by the war.
It had not been controlled and suppressed in the same way Goebbels had done in Germany with UFA and other production units. Some movies were in the middle of being made when the Allied occupied Rome. They were finished. American movies – an instant hit in all movie theatres- had to be dubbed. And the weekly newsreels had to be produced as well.
Zivko liked what he was doing. The salary was very welcome and he was able to finally leave the state of idleness forced upon him by events.

When the schools opened again in late summer, Otto made it to the Lycée Francais. He learned French with an astonishing speed and became a first-class student very rapidly.
The others discussed and waited. Mavro did not find a suitable job in the banking business. And Rudolf, who wanted to resume his studies as soon as possible, had to wait until the university opened again.

However, if they looked beyond the immediate future the basic alternative was a simple one: Return to Zagreb or immigrate to America as soon as it would become possible? Almost everybody was in favor of the latter.
The USA - that simply was a different world. They were winning the war against Hitler and would win against Japan as well. It looked like the country of milk and honey. They would all find work over there. And it was a country of liberty, where Jews were not persecuted but accepted as welcome citizens.

In the end, Zivko and Bertha opted for America. And they would take Otto with them. Mavro, Cecilia and Ruzha shared their choice. They would wait for the war to end and then apply for the necessary papers. In the meantime they all had to stay in Rome since there was no other place to go.

Rudolf was opposed to such a solution, however.
He did not want to emigrate for a variety of reasons. Although he admired the USA for what they were doing in their fight against the German and Japanese dictatorships, he had not lost his socialist opinions altogether. Go to the homeland of free-wheeling capitalism – no! Wasn't there a chance to build Yugoslavia as a modern democratic and socialist state? Wasn't Tito

somebody who was a guarantee against both Stalinism (Rudolf had not forgotten his discussions with uncle Ignatz in Paris) and right-wing solutions or the restitution of Monarchy?
There was a practical reason, too. He had started his studies in Zagreb and wanted to continue them there. In this way his first trimesters would not be lost.

Probably he was not courageous enough as well. He had been a daredevil from time to time. Yet, these were moments of great courage, which were dictated by circumstances.
Deep in his heart, he was a cautious man who did not want to run risks. And immigration to a foreign continent that would be a great risk, indeed!
One evening he announced firmly: “I will join the partisans and return to Zagreb with them.”

Everybody was appalled, and so was Blanka. There was nothing, but strictly nothing, which drew her back to Croatia. In America she would be able to finish high school quickly and then go to a good college. At her job with the Allied Control Commission she had become acquainted with a lot of Americans. These people were remarkably different from all the others she had known before. They were relaxed, friendly and self-conscious – in spite of the fact that the war was still raging only a hundred miles to the North. And the Americans had told her a lot about their great and beautiful country. For a young Jewish woman who had just escaped from three years of persecution and fear all that sounded like paradise.

She implored her husband. She reminded him of all their friends who had emigrated before the war. She pointed to their Jewish contacts in Rome who, in their great majority, preferred the USA to Yugoslavia.
However, all her pleas were of no avail. She knew how stubborn he could be. And when Tito’s forces and the Red Army took Belgrade by mid-October, his decision became final. Nazis and Ustasha would be thrown out of Yugoslavia, and he simply could not stand aside in such a situation.
He would go, leave Blanka with her parents and get her to Yugoslavia as soon as the circumstances would allow it. He would try to be accepted into the medical corps and to avoid being involved in any real fighting. And as stubborn as he could be, Blanka knew that he would do everything to keep his promises.

Rudolf’s decision led to a bitter quarreling with his parents. They could not understand it. They were not ready to accept that he would leave them alone with a choice they found reasonable for very good reasons.

The ensuing rift was a serious one. It would take a long time to heal, if it ever did.
And also Blanka's parents were bitterly disappointed. They had to accept that her daughter would have to follow her husband. Yet, they bore the consequences with visible anger and a lot of grief.

Rudolf knew all that, of course. He tried to plead his cause during many debated amongst them. However, when he learned that he could not convince the rest of his family, he sped up his decision.
Two or three weeks later he traveled to a place called Altamura. Here, close to Bari on the lower Adriatic coast the Partisans had built a large training camp with the support of the Allies.
Furthermore an important military hospital had been built in Altamura as well. It was part of the partisans' medical service, which had been built and was run by Jewish doctors under the leadership of Dr. Herbert Kraus. Rudolf applied for service at the hospital and he was accepted.

He had taken his first step on the bumpy road back to Zagreb.

Zdenka Slovak's tale

Well, his decision might have been influenced by Zdenka Slovak. Zdenka, his sister's best friend from early childhood, had dropped by on a surprise visit – on a Sunday afternoon two weeks ago.
She was working for an institution, which tried to help Displaced Persons in the area of the Italian capital. This job connected her to the offices Blanka was working at. She had found the name "Kandel" on a telephone list and had inquired about the address.

When the first excitement had subsided, when coffee and pastries had been put on the table, it was up to Zdenka to tell her story. And it turned out to be another extraordinary tale, indeed.

When Sophia and her husband had left Dalmatia to head for Latin America, Zdenka had shared a room with Mausi Spitzer whom the Kandels had known as a girl. The two young women worked in a bauxite factory in an industrial suburb of Split. Mausi had to serve in the canteen, but Zdenka – due to her knowledge of foreign languages – made it to the office. She had to work long hours, but she liked it and made some money.

500 Dinars bought her a fake certificate of baptism, giving her religion as "Old Catholic", a practically unknown offspring of the Roman Catholic Church.

Zdenka thought that, with this document and a regular job, she would be safe from persecution. However, both she and Mausi were arrested a few weeks afterwards. The Italian police officer who came to see them stated bluntly: "You must be a Jew!"
A stunned Zdenka protested: "No, no, I am a Croatian and a Christian. Here are my papers!"
The Italian was not impressed at all. "Papers? Everybody can buy forged papers these days. Look at you name! You know, I have been sent to Germany to study Race Theory in Berlin. And it is well known that names, which indicate a geographical origin such as Slovak or Polak are typical Jewish names."

After some discussion the two women admitted their true origin. They were put on a ship, together with many other Jews. After a bumpy voyage, which made them terribly sea-sick, they arrived in Venice and were brought to a city called Asolo, their place of confinement.
The living conditions in Asolo were roughly the same Cecilia and Mavro had experienced in Arezzo. Zdenka gave Italian lessons to other émigrés and opened, together with some friends, a provisional school for Jewish children. They were given financial assistance by DELASSEM, an important Jewish relief organization of Italian origin. These children even had to pass their normal exams, supervised by the local authorities.

When Mussolini had been toppled and came back with the help of his German masters, Zdenka decided to flee to the South. However, she needed better papers to succeed in such an adventure.
She went to the Town Hall of Asolo. And it was there that a whole string of miracles uncoiled.

The civil servant in charge of travel permits heard her invented story. "Sorry, Miss Slovak, but I can't help you," he said in a firm voice, which left no room for further discussion. And then he said: "I have to leave now for an urgent meeting." He got up from behind the table and left the room abruptly. Yet, before closing the door, he turned around and stared at his writing table. He made sure that Zdenka looked there as well and was gone.
When he had left, she went to that table. On top of some other documents there were eleven blank permits – with all the necessary seals on them! The Italian had wanted her to find and to take them!

Zdenka grabbed this invaluable treasure, put it in her handbag and left quickly.
She distributed those documents to her friends and kept one for herself. She just had to fill in a name. Zdenka chose "Zita Slovatti" – a name with the same initials as her real one. Such precaution was necessary, since most of the women at that time had at least some handkerchiefs with their initials on them.

Mausi and Zdenka went to Venice, where they lived for a short while. But the Allies were too alluring, and the two women wanted to be closer to them. Rome was their next destination.
On the 3rd of November 1943 they took the train, together with two other Jewish people. Not far behind Florence the train stopped at a small station. Zdenka looked out of the window and asked the steward : "Will we stay here for a while? I am terribly thirsty and want to get some water." "Do that, Signora," the steward said. "The track to Arezzo is interrupted and we will stop here for half an hour at least."

She left the car and went to a tap close to the stationmaster's office. And while she was drinking, the train left the station without any warning! She tried to catch it, but it was too late. A distressed Mausi yelled from the window, but to no avail.
Zdenka was shocked. What would she do now? She was sitting in the middle of nowhere – her luggage and her coat with all her belongings and papers were on the train, which disappeared in the distance!

When she explained her desperate situation to the station master, he said: "Well, there are no ways to stop the train between here and Arezzo. However," he added when he saw the tears in Zdenka's eyes, " come with me. I will try to organize some help."
They left the office, and the station master started to stop all the cars driving by. The third or the fourth one went to Arezzo. The driver agreed to take Zdenka as a passenger. He did his very best, but when the car arrived at Arezzo station, the train had left just ten minutes ago.

The young woman was completely lost, when she noticed a group of German officers nearby. In utter despair she decided to ask them for help. Her German was absolutely fluent, her hair was blonde and her eyes were blue. She really looked like a showpiece of the "master race".
And when she gave her story to the officers, they took her for a German right away. She was offered a light dinner at the station buffet, given a military coat and put on a halftrack.

"The driver will follow the train, even to Rome if necessary," one of the officers announced and clacked his heels.
Zdenka had not to drive very far. The train was sitting in a small station some thirty miles from Arezzo, waiting for another track repair. When she entered her compartment in a German military coat, her companions simply gasped. And when she told them about her adventures, they gasped again before they finally believed it.

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Mausi and Zdenka reached the Italian capital in the early hours of the next morning. While in Rome they stayed at the "Principe Umberto", an inexpensive and unobtrusive hotel.
They learned that a small group of the Italian underground resistance was operating from this place. This group provided them with a new set of fake papers. When they were asked to give a suitable name, Zdenka came up with "Tagliacozzo", an Italian name she had heard quite a while ago and which she had always liked.
This choice could have become a deadly mistake.

It was only a few days before Rome was liberated (Mausi Spitzer had left the hotel some weeks ago to live with a Jewish refugee she had fallen in love with), when somebody knocked at Zdenka's door in the middle of the night. The knocking followed a regular pattern, which she had rehearsed with the underground people. She knew that it was one of them and opened the door.
"Get up and do it in a hurry!" a young man whispered in an agitated voice. "The 'black shirts', these damned Fascists, will be here in a few minutes. They come to arrest you!"
Zdenka was too much afraid to ask questions or to argue. She grabbed her most important belongings, stuffed them into a suitcase, put a coat over her nightgown, slipped into her only pair of shoes and followed the man.

They tiptoed down some flights and left the hotel through the back door. Everything remained silent. But while they were running away from the hotel, they clearly heard screeching tires at the opposite side of the building. The henchmen had arrived – too late, thank God!

It was only when they had reached their hiding place, a big, dark apartment house not far away, that Zdenka started to ask questions. The answer was very simple : The name she had given for her faked papers – Tagliacozzo – was the name of a very famous Jewish family! No wonder then that the 'camicie nere' got suspicious during one of their frequent controls.

Zdenka hid in the apartment house until Rome was liberated.
Shortly afterwards her friend Mausi had married – the first marriage for some time in the Central Synagogue of Rome's venerable Jewish community. She had decided to follow her husband who wanted to join the ranks of Tito's partisans. And Zdenka Slovak was resolved to do exactly that as well.

(Final Status before linguistic control: February,2002)

THE ROAD BACK TO ZAGREB

1945

Germany

In January, the Red Army starts a decisive assault on the Eastern Front. Millions of Germans flee westwards. Hitler moves to his last refuge, the "Reichskanzlei" in Berlin and its bunkers.
In February, the Red Army crosses the Oder River. It takes Budapest shortly afterwards. Dresden is destroyed by a murderous air raid.
American forces reach Cologne in March. A few days later they cross the Rhine River at Remagen. Seven Allied armies begin to liberate the Western and Central regions of Germany. Soviet forces start their attack on Vienna. The Ruhr area is conquered in early April. Two weeks later the 9th US Army crosses the Elbe River at Magdeburg. The Red Army begins with its final assault on Berlin.
On April 30, Hitler commits suicide. The flag of the Soviet Union is hoisted on the roof of the destroyed Reichstag. The capitulation of the German forces begins in early May. On May 9th the unconditional surrender of Germany is completed.

Italy

In April, Polish units conquer Bologna. The last organized defense line of the Fascist Republic collapses. American divisions take Parma, Mantova and La Spezia.
On April 16th, the last Fascist Cabinet issues orders for the dissolution of the "Union of the Israelite Communities in Italy". Mussolini is taken prisoner by Italian partisans ten days later. He is shot on April 28, together with his companion Clara Petacci. The German forces in Italy capitulate one day later.

Yugoslavia

King Peter II and his cabinet return to Belgrade from their Cairo exile. Marshal Tito forms a provisional government in March.

Yugoslav units occupy Trieste and Zagreb on May 3rd. The Croatian Ustasha forces flee to Maribor in Northern Slovenia, where they are made prisoners by the British forces. A short time later they are handed over to Tito. Thousands of them are killed.

The Jewish People

In January, the SS "dissolves" the Auschwitz extermination complex. 66.000 prisoners are sent on a "Death March" to the Groß Rosen concentration camp during which 15.000 of them die. When the Red Army arrives at the Auschwitz compound on January 27 they find 7.650 detainees still alive.
The International Red Cross is able to evacuate some 1.200 Jews from the "Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia" to Switzerland in February and 413 Danish Jews to Sweden in March.
In April, the camps of Buchenwald (liberated by US troops some days later), Ravensbrück, Neuengamme and Stutthoff are "dissolved". Many thousands of Jews die during these "evacuations". When British units liberate Bergen-Belsen the camp is infested by a typhus epidemic. Many prisoners die here even weeks after the war has ended, amongst them Anne Frank.
On May 3rd the Theresienstadt concentration camp is handed over to the International Red Cross; 17.247 Jewish inmates survive. On May 4th the SS leaves the Mauthausen camp, the last part of their sinister empire. And the killers cowardly prepare their own escape and survival.

Blanka joins the partisans as well

I visited the city of Lovran in 1969, during a summer holiday. Lovran is a charming seaside resort on the eastern side of the Istrian peninsula, not far away from the town of Rijeka. One day I undertook an extended walk in the steep hills above the city.
It was a peaceful scenery, marked by small orchards, vineyards and breathtaking views of the Mediterranean Sea. There were many small farmhouses around.
What was astonishing at first sight was the fact that almost half of these houses were destroyed at least to a great extent. And the light gray walls bore slogans – all written in red chalk. An old farmer translated them for me. "Long live Tito" or "Death to the Nazis" they said.
In this way the walls of destroyed farmhouses bore witness to the fight waged

there by courageous partisans some 25 years earlier. It was this fight of the partisans, which marked the lives of Blanka and Rudolf during the last months of the War.

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Nothing ever had prepared Blanka to put on a military uniform or to carry a knapsack, let alone a weapon.
In her Zagreb years she had been pampered by her parents and by the wealth surrounding her. She had lived in a rather romantic world marked by nice companions at school, good-looking boys in the Maccabi gym, dancing lessons, a gorgeous dress from time to time and fine vacations at the seaside or in the mountains.
She had coped surprisingly well with the ensuing turmoil of the years in Slovenia and Italy. She had witnessed naked terror and had to muster all her courage several times.
Yet, the family had tried to keep up appearances even in the most difficult and dire situations.

But after she had been able to come out of hiding in Rome and to resume a more normal life again, the constant stress of the refugee gave way quickly to a much more relaxed state of the mind and of the soul. And her job with the Allied Control Commission greatly contributed to such a development. Her good humor became infectious again.

The pretty girl had grown into a beautiful woman. She was petite and well proportioned. Her shining brown her fell freely upon her shoulders. She liked to chat and to laugh, was curious but not inquisitive. All in all, Blanka was both very likeable and very sociable.
No wonder then that many men admired her and tried to start a little flirt on the sides. Well, she liked to be admired and would answer a smile with a smile. But it was Rudolf, and Rudolf alone, who was in her heart.

She simply had to be as close to him as was humanly possible. And that is why she decided to follow her husband. Her decision to join the Yugoslav partisans as well was dictated by love, not at all by reason or conviction. Later on, Blanka put it soberly: “I followed him – as usual”.
But the decision must have been much more difficult, of course. After all, she did not only have to give up a job, which she had begun to like very much. She had to leave her family behind as well. Her parents and her brother would emigrate, and she did not know when and under which circumstances she would see them again.

And she had to exchange the relative normalcy of an existence in postwar Rome against all the uncertainties and risks of a life close to the battlefields.

Blanka wrote a letter to Rudolf whom she had not seen for two months since he hadn't been given any leave yet. "My love, I simply can not wait for you to ask me to come to Altamura or elsewhere," it read more or less." I will arrive next week, and we will have two birthdays to think of, yours and mine. Please help me with the Medical Corps. I want to be with you all the time! I love you very, very much…."
An absolutely thrilled Rudolf answered the letter right away and asked her to come as quickly as possible.

To work at the Allied Control Commission carried some privileges. Her boss, an elderly major from Philadelphia, disliked to see her leave, but he fully understood and appreciated her reasons. Blanka received an excellent certificate and her full salary for the next four weeks.
And then the major offered her a free ride to Altamura. A truck with a lot of drugs and medical instruments was bound to go there the next afternoon. Blanka gratefully accepted this suggestion. Her parents remained astonishingly quiet when she came home to tell them that she was about to leave the next day.
When she did her suitcase and went to bid them goodbye Bertha and Zivko still exercised a remarkable self-control. They knew that Blanka's place was at the side of her husband. Bertha still had some gold coins for her daughter. "For emergency cases," she said and smiled in order to hide some tears inside. "Take care and stay close to your husband".
Blanka put up a courageous face. She hugged and kissed her parents as well as her brother. "Everything will turn out fine," she said in a brave voice. " And perhaps I can convince Rudolf to come with me to America once the war is definitely over".
She turned away quickly because there were some tears in her eyes as well.

When she arrived at Piazza Barberini the truck was already waiting for her on a side road. It had come from Civitavecchia harbor and had taken some additional documents at headquarters. The driver, a black sergeant, and another soldier invited her into the cabin. It was a long journey, and they arrived at Altamura close to midnight only. When the truck arrived at the gates of the camp a group of Yugoslavs approached, greeted the Americans, exchanged some documents and started to unload the vehicle.
What an experience to meet country-fellows in uniform – quite in the open! How thrilling it was to be addressed in her own mother tongue!

Blanka anxiously enquired about her husband. The Yugoslavs laughed, and one of them said: Everybody around here is sleeping already, young lady. Everybody, that is, with the exception of our group, the guards and the officer on night duty." "I understand," Blanka retorted, and don't call me 'young lady'! I have come to Altamura to work with you!"
"Very well – comrade," the soldier said. He stood on guard mockingly, and the others laughed again.

Blanka thanked her American escort and entered the camp. Rudolf had already gone to sleep – what a pity! Yet, he could not know that his wife would arrive that night.
Blanka had to register with the officer on duty and was given provisional quarters. She found herself in a tiny room, scarcely furnished with a field bed, a wooden table with a simple chair and an enameled washbasin with a towel next to it.
Thank God - electric light was available. She turned it on and looked around. And the she saw a shiny black bug with a pink head and pink spots on it, crawling slowly along the rough top of her desk. It waddled a little as it crawled, like an old woman carrying too many parcels.
Reason to scream!
No – no reason to scream! Blanka said to herself. Remember, you are in the army now! She took off one of her shoes, killed the bug and threw it out through the door. Never before had she done such a thing.

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The soldiers on the morning shift let her sleep, but they woke up Rudolf very early. "Comrade, get up! Your wife has arrived last night," they told him and laughed. "If you make it there in time, you might even kiss her awake!"
Rudolf dressed hurriedly and rushed to the reception barrack. He opened the door of Blanka's room very cautiously. There was his beloved wife and she was still asleep!
He took her in his arms and spoke to her very softly: "Good morning, Blanka! My God, I am so glad that you are here!" Blanka didn't even open her eyes. But she answered his embrace with a long kiss. They were together again. She said: "Why don't you stay here with me for a while?" But she said it half jokingly. Such a thing can't be done in a military barrack at six o'clock in the morning.

As it turned out, Rudolf's preparatory efforts had paid. Blanka was accepted in the Medical Corps.

She was asked to work in one of the offices where the distribution of all medical material was handled.
She was handed out a uniform with the special badge of this medical unit. Looking at it she thought: Here is a badge one can be proud to wear; what a difference to the infamous "Jew" badge I have been forced to put on my dress in Zagreb only such a short time ago!

"You are right. I am fond of my badge as well. But Zagreb – has it really been such a short time ago?" Rudolf said when she told him about it later on in the day.
Anyhow, to Rudolf and Blanka the last three years seemed to be an eternity. Too much had happened since then, and their world had completely changed. They both knew that the good old times would never come back. Yet, why shouldn't the new times be good as well after all? They were resolved to attack them together.

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The next weeks were intense, but happy ones. They worked a lot, and they liked to be with each other in their scarce periods of relaxation. Well, Blanka would have liked to meet Zdenka Slovak and Mausi Spitzer.
However, both women had already left Altamura for Yugoslavia. Mausi was already gone when Rudolf arrived at the camp. And Zdenka ? She had become Zdenka Lipa in the meantime. She had visited her friend in the late summer and had met Dr. Lipa, the medical director of Altamura, during that visit.
It was love on first sight. They mad married in Bari on November 18th .
Zdenka had come to the camp on the following day. She had met Rudolf, but the Lipas had left Altamura only two weeks later. They had joined the fighting forces as well.

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Blanka turned twenty-one years old. She was now an adult, even in formal terms. Nobody cared, however, since every one of the many young people around here had become off-age well before the official date.
They were given a two days' leave and spent it in a lonely hotel on the deserted beaches of the Adriatic coast. The place was called Monopoli. They joked about this curious name, admired the old town with its picturesque harbor and enjoyed each one of their forty-eight hours.

New Year's Eve offered the welcome opportunity of a big and hilarious festivity in the camp, and two days later Rudolf turned twenty-five. There was no special leave this time, just some flowers Blanka had gotten hold of somewhere.

Events took another turn only a couple of days later. Tito's army had well advanced into Yugoslavia and was preparing the final assaults on the enemy. New front lines had been established, far away from the Dalmatian coast. More doctors, nurses and field hospitals were needed inside the Balkan Mountains now. And the liberated areas had become quiet enough to allow for the building of sick bays and rehabilitation centers.
As a consequence Altamura was all but dissolved. Only some supply and training units remained there. Everybody else was asked to prepare for departure. And Rudolf was one of the next to leave.

Starting from his physiotherapeutic experience he had shown an immense talent in practical orthopedic surgery. And that was in constant need in times of war, unfortunately. This was one of the toughest and most difficult jobs the medical corps had to offer. One needed nerves of steel, absolutely steady hands, great will power and an enormous capacity of concentration. Rudolf had all that. He excelled in what he was doing and had become totally indispensable.

The experienced Jewish doctors who had given him an initial, albeit very brief training were absolutely convinced that he would be a first-class doctor after the war.
Blanka, on the other hand, was ordered to stay behind in Italy for the moment. She was needed in logistics and in the dispatching of medical material. And that was still done from Altamura.

Once more, Fate separated them.

War – even behind the frontlines

The final months of the Second World War in Europe had arrived. "Greater Germany" itself had become the central battleground. The Western Allies reached and crossed the borders of the "Reich" from France and Belgium; the Red Army advanced from the East. Berlin and the final downfall of Hitler, his

gang of criminals included, were given highest priority by the Allied Chief Commanders.
All military observers knew that those parts of Europe, which were still occupied by German troops, would follow immediately if and when the "Fatherland" itself had fallen. Why run too many risks on the less important theaters of war?
That is why the frontline in Italy ran between Pisa, Bologna and Ravenna until early April, before the final mopping-up began. Milan and the plains of Northern Italy still were in the hands of the Germans and of Mussolini's puppet régime. And that is why the liberation of Yugoslavia was largely left to Tito's forces, which had to accept Soviet support reluctantly.
At the beginning of the year the "Wehrmacht" and the Ustasha still held the larger part of Croatia. And it was there that the partisan army had to deploy its major efforts – right in the middle of Rudolf's and Blanka's homeland.

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Fighting in the steep ravines and on the bare mountain slopes of the Balkans has always been very direct and very brutal. The terrain doesn't lend itself to large-scale operations. The otherwise inherent advantages of mechanized units cannot be fully deployed in areas where the supply lines are stretched and prone to constant disruption.
These conditions were favorable for the kind of guerilla-like warfare Tito's troops knew so well. On top of it, they knew the terrain and were fighting for their country. Yet, when it came to direct and open encounters with the German enemy and his Croatian auxiliaries the Yugoslavs still were largely inferior both in firepower and in armor. As a consequence the partisans progressed very slowly and encountered heavy losses. There were many soldiers killed and even more wounded, very often terribly mutilated.

No wonder then that, during those last months of the war, Rudolf's life was entirely concentrated on his duties in the mobile field hospitals. He worked day and night – for weeks on end. It has been difficult to make him talk about this period. And that is perfectly understandable. He had to witness too much human suffering, too many deaths.
His unit, poorly equipped and insufficiently manned, was on the move all the time. There were no well-defined frontlines in Croatia. The battleground changed constantly, and the doctors were needed everywhere.
When the noise of the fighting subsided, the wounded would be carried to the next available sick bay. There they came in – fine young men, bound on stretchers, screaming, sobbing, breathing heavily,

most of them only half conscious. The ambulance men had administered morphine injections in cases of need. Yet, there wasn't even enough morphine available, so that many had to suffer without any relief.

When the transports with the stretches arrived, Rudolf and a Jewish doctor in his unit had to make the most difficult decisions of their lifetimes. Which of those mutilated soldiers could be saved by an immediate chirurgical intervention? Where to start? And who had to be given up?
The two men worked in a constant frenzy. What they did is called "Orthopedic Surgery" in medical language. But that would be a big euphemism. They had to patch up or to amputate hands and feet, legs and arms; they had to administer provisional artificial limbs. And they had to do it quickly – in order to save as many lives as possible and because the next stretchers would arrive very soon.

You do not think, let alone dream, if you are in such a situation. You just function.
And Rudolf worked, worked and worked. As a rule of thumb he had to do with four or five hours of sleep per night. And when his unit was given a day of rest, he slept for the better part of it – on a field bed, in a deserted farmhouse or simply on the ground. He didn't know where they were. And he couldn't care less. He had forgotten everything about they days of the week or even about the months of the year.
He didn't think of Blanka very often, either. Wife, love, marriage, home – all that had to wait.

From time to time he had to help a soldier who turned out to be a Jew. These were the rare moments of emotion and pride. "His" people were fighting, as bravely as all the others! He remembers that he had to amputate the left forearm of a man whom he knew from his youth. He had been a member of Maccabi's fencing team in Zagreb. This young Jew was left-handed. When he looked at the stump of his arm he said with a faint smile:"Well, now I will have to start fencing with my right arm. Can I do it?". Rudolf answered his smile and nodded.
"Yes, you can do it. Wait and see – you will be the best one-armed fencer in the whole of Yugoslavia!"

It was only after the war that Rudolf learned about the important role Jewish soldiers, officers, doctors and support specialists had played in Marshal Tito's army. More than 4.500 of them are known by name. More then 3.000 have served in fighting units.

Dozens of Jews have been made officers (Rudolf himself had become a Lieutenant when the war was over). 150 were decorated with the Partisans' Medal of Honor and 10 brave men have been made Heroes of Yugoslavia later on.

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Yet, all this became known or happened after the war. And the war was not over yet.
In April, the Yugoslav forces came out of the mountains. They made their way to the hills and the small plains to the East and to the South of Zagreb.
The partisans progressed slowly and with great care. Their leadership knew, of course, that the days of the Ustasha and the Germans were counted. Why risk too many men during those last days of fighting?

This slow progress had at least one disastrous consequence, however.
It allowed the enemy to continue with the murderous job of killing many thousands of inmates in the camps – Jews and non-Jews alike.

Rudolf remembers that his team has been in Gradiska, which belonged to the Jasenovac concentration camp complex. Gradiska was liberated on April 23. Only two days earlier the Ustasha had blasted the buildings here and in Jasenovac proper. Most of the inmates had been killed.
The Jewish members of the Medical Corps were deeply traumatized by what they saw in the ruins of the camp. And Rudolf does not want to talk about what he had to live through – even 55 years later. His wish has to be respected. But we have many testimonials of both inmates and liberators to give us a clear picture of the indescribable horror of the scenery.
Trauma gave way to deep hatred and an ardent wish for revenge, especially when it was learned what had happened in Jasenovac, which was reached by the partisans on May 2. This was even worse than Gradiska. And it was on a much, much bigger scale.

But there were no objects for hatred and revenge yet. The German troops retreated slowly to Zagreb and their last, provisional defense line on the banks of the Sava River. The Ustasha soldiers, militias, policemen, civil servants and other criminals took their families and fled in panic. They tried to reach the North of the country. This part of Yugoslavia was controlled by the British army, which took them into military custody.
It would be only a few weeks later that the British would hand over these people to their avengers.

Rudolf reached Zagreb around May 15th . The war had ended some days earlier, but his exhausting work had not. The medical corps was ordered to occupy and to render operational an old hospital from Austrian times, which had been deserted by the Germans and their Croatian auxiliaries.
Rudolf lived on the premises.
He met Zdenka Lipa and her husband again. They had done their duty on a different frontline and had entered Zagreb with the first medical vehicle, on May 9th, 1945. And the crowds were in the streets again, applauding, cheering, throwing flowers and waving flags. "Just as in 1941," Zdenka remembers.

It was only then that he started to think of, to long for and to worry about his wife. He did not know where Blanka was. He had not been in personal contact with her since he had come to Yugoslavia. And it was only then that he could be reached at all. There had been no address before.

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Well, the large supply center at Altamura was closed down end of January or beginning of February, only three weeks after Rudolf had left it.
Tito's army did no longer need it, since safe transport routes had been established on the Eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea.
"Comrade Blanka", as she was called by now (though she never got used to it), was assigned to the supply unit of a battalion, which was fighting in the Velebit Mountains behind the Dalmatian coastline. This meant that she wouldn't be anywhere near to her husband in the foreseeable future. She asked to be transferred to the field hospitals, she protested - to no avail. Even in a partisan army, there were basic rules. And "An Order is an Order" was one of them.

Blanka was given a different uniform, a knapsack with all the different petty matters the army thought she would need and a pair of rather ill fitting boots. After having added her personal toiletry articles, her purse and her notebook with all the useful addresses she was ready for departure.
An American truck took her and two male Yugoslav soldiers up the Adriatic coast to Bari. For two or three days they had to wait in provisional barracks at the military part of the harbor.
Then they boarded an old and tottering ship, which would take them across the Adriatic to Split on the Croatian side. Blanka recalls vividly that the seas were rough, the waves were high and that she got terribly seasick during her first maritime experience. Complete exhaustion was the consequence.

Yet, when the ship had docked in Split early next morning, she was offered no time to recover. People at the Harbormaster's office gave her a travel order. She had to reach a place called Gospic as soon as possible. Some jeeps and military convoys later she reached her place of destination.

Gospic was a small town in the hills of the Lickopolje region, right behind the Velebit Mountains. Before the war, it must have been a nice place for a few days off and a convenient starting point for some good hiking.
But now, many of the houses were destroyed or deserted. The streets were filled with rubble and the debris of war material.
The Yugoslavs had taken Gospic only a week ago. Blanka's battalion was staying in tents; the commander of the battalion and his "offices" had moved into one of the deserted houses. That is where Blanka moved and got organized as best as she could. She was given a small room under the roof, which she had to share with another woman. There were no beds – just a straw mattress and two blankets.

The fighting units were out in the hills; the noise of the battle was to be heard in the distance. Snow covered the whole area and it was bitterly cold. When the commander introduced her to her new duties one day later he added: "We will move tomorrow, comrade. Please have everything prepared in such a way that I can put it into my car. You will follow with one of the supply trucks".

It was still dark when Blanka carried her knapsack and a wooden box with the "office equipment" to the commander's car. This vehicle turned out to be an old halftrack, courtesy of the British Armed Forces. It still wore the old British signs and had its steering wheel on the right side.
Blanka had exchanged her ill-fitting boots with the woman who had shared her room. Somehow she had gotten hold of thick woolen socks, a big scarf, an old ski cap and a pair of felt gloves.
Nevertheless, it was freezing cold on the truck, which followed the fighting units into the hills and mountains north of Gospic.

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For the next fortnight her days and nights followed the same pattern of frost and frenzy. The truck would zigzag through the rugged terrain in the mountains. In the evenings they would camp in semi-deserted villages or in isolated farmhouses where the driver of the commander's halftrack had already unloaded Blanka's rudimentary office equipment as well as her personal belongings.

Another truck driver would take the wounded, drive them to the next sick bay during the nights, try to find some gasoline on the way and load weapons, ammunition and other supplies for his return trip to the front line.

It was Blanka's job to distribute and to manage all non-military supply items. This job was both easy and boring – but it had to be done. The overall living-conditions were absolutely dire. Personal hygiene was very low, the nights had to be spent on the floor of some dirty house, usually infected by bugs and other insects, the blankets were not warm enough to offer any comfort and the food happened to be irregular and poor.
Worse still: Blanka had time enough to reflect about her situation. And a nagging question haunted her all the time: Where was Rudolf? After all, he had been the only reason why she had left Rome and thrown herself into such an adventure! She wrote letters and asked the truck drivers to inquire at the sick bays. There never was any answer.

After the war, Rudolf told her that during all those months he had received only one of the letters - when he had already arrived in Zagreb. He had not bothered to answer it any longer, because he thought that he would meet his wife very soon.
Apparently, there were more pressing things for Tito's army than to set up a well organized military postal service.

When the fighting in the Lickopolje region had subsided, Blanka's battalion was transferred to the border area between Slovenia and Italy, not far away from the twin towns of Gorizia and Gorica. It was another long and strenuous trip. But the battalion came through Rijeka and spent a night or two in the relative comfort of regular military barracks.
A team of doctors and medical personnel arrived and started an ugly exercise: Everybody had to get rid of lice, which practically all of them had caught during the last weeks.
Blanka was lucky. She hadn't washed her hair for weeks. Yet, since her hair happened to be extremely dry, the lice had spared her.

All in all, Blanka's position in the battalion was quite peculiar. Not only was she a woman – she was young and good-looking even in a crumpled uniform! Her only female companion in the entire unit was a lot older and not very attractive at that. No wonder then, that Blanka was the constant object of wistful looks from all the men around her.
She was friendly with everyone, liked to laugh and to share a joke from time to time. But nobody ever made a successful pass at her, and even an

innocent flirt was out of question. She exuded a natural authority, which made the soldiers respect her. And when the commander of the battalion tried his luck with a little too much insistence, she took him to the side one evening, smiled and said: " Your silly advances run against any socialist ethic, comrade. And it runs against the Army's code of conduct as well. You know that I am happily married. And if you don't change your behavior I will have to send a report to your superiors".
That settled the matter definitely.

Apart from those very minor incidents and from the general hardship coming with warfare in the mountains, the spirits in the battalion were very high. The mission statement of the partisans' army was as simple as it was convincing: Liberate the mother country from the oppressors!
The fight had a purpose everybody understood. And the purposefulness resulted in motivation and courage. The military leadership was good and had become professional by experience; there always was food and fresh water. The cold and the snow were ugly and slowed down the speed of all military operations. But nobody cared since they were on the winning side!

And when the soldiers had lit a big fire in the center of their provisional camps everybody came out after dinner to sing the songs of the partisans or some old folk tunes from the various parts of Yugoslavia. There were three or four Jewish fighters around. Assisted by Blanka they enriched the repertoire with songs like "Hava Nagila" or "Hevenu Shalom Aleichem".
Blanka knew these songs from her Maccabi times. And she was romantic enough to live those evenings as if they were some form of girl-scouts' meetings.

Otherwise, there were many déjà vus in the hills around Gorica and a little later on in the mountains around Ptuj in Slovenia, just south of Maribor. There was fighting in a lot of different places, there were the dead, which Blanka only got to see when they had been mercifully covered by blankets. And there were the wounded, which had to be supplied with first-aid material from the small stock Blanka had to manage.
One day, the halftrack of the commander hit a land mine. The driver was killed on the spot; the commander himself got away with only minor injuries. Blanka's equipment was loaded on the supply truck and that complicated her work a little bit. Thank God she was given help so that she was not burdened with the old Olympia typewriter of German making, the files and her other "office material".

Only once did she find rest in a deserted house, where the former inhabitants had left behind an old couch. When she tried to settle on it, she noticed with horror that hundreds of bugs fled from it and covered the ground. She screamed and ran out of the house. Everybody around laughed heartily; the commander cleared his small personal tent and left it to her.
High up in the Slovenian mountains the roads became increasingly unmanageable for the supply truck. After a while it ran out of fuel altogether. For the next couple of days the soldiers had to carry everything on their backs. And though Blanka was given some relief by the men, the terrain was very difficult and walking was no fun at all. She put on a brave face, but those were the few days when she was really suffering.

When the battalion approached a small village high up on the slopes around Ptuj, Blanka was completely exhausted. It had been a terrible day! Her feet hurt from some nasty blisters, her back ached with the weight of the knapsack and she gasped heavily in the thin mountain air.
She was dragging behind the others but had refused to be given any help. And she hadn't even thought about giving up. When she reached the first houses of the village, an old farmer suddenly appeared from nowhere. He approached cautiously, greeted her and said: "Girl, poor little girl, you are suffering. A real drink will do you a lot of good."
And with that he drew a metal bottle from the sleeves of his coat. "What is this," Blanka asked doubtfully. " That?" answered the old man with a broad grin between his rotten teeth. "That is a strong herb brandy. I produce it myself. But why don't you taste it?"
She had never had a brandy before. Wine, a sweet aperitif and a grappa yes – but a home-distilled herb liquor? Well, she wanted to be kind to the farmer who only meant to be friendly, grasped the bottle and took a big mouthful. The stuff burned like hell and drove tears into her eyes. Yet, when she had recovered a bit, she felt new strength, thanked the man and followed the others with new resolve.
In the evening, she procured herself another bottle from another farmer. "My drink of last resort," she told the others. And that was precisely what it was.

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Some days afterwards the battalion reached a more accessible area with a road running through the hills. The supply truck re-appeared. It took up its routine, and Blanka was relieved from marching altogether.

The Yugoslavs took Ptuj after some intense fighting, and a period of well-deserved rest was given to Blanka's unit as well. She slept for almost a whole day, and in the evening the commander asked her into his quarters.
"Comrade Blanka", he announced, "I have good news for you. I have been informed by our wireless that your husband is alive and well. He is working behind the front lines in Central Croatia".
Blanka's heart jumped with joy. Rudolf was well! That was very good news, indeed. She smiled all over her face and asked the commander:" But couldn't we use the wireless as well to inform him about my situation?" "This has already been done," the commander replied, dryly. "But that is not all the good news I have for you. We will stay here for a couple of days, and then we will be transferred to Istria in order to mop up some pockets of resistance".
"Does that mean that we will get out of the snow?" Blanka inquired hopefully.
"Not only that," her boss answered. " This means that the battalion will have at least a good week of rest. I have decided to give you some days of leave. You have behaved like a true soldier, but you look totally exhausted to me. Why don't you go down to Rijeka and enjoy a few days in the sun?"

Blanka knew better than to contradict her commander. She thanked him and left the room. A military convoy left Ptuj the next day. It took Blanka down to Rijeka and the Adriatic coast, which she loved so much. That promised to be a good time!

Remote relatives and Blanka's return

And a good time it was. When she arrived in Rijeka the sun was shining from blue skies, a light breeze had brought comfortable temperatures to the city and the crowds had come out to the squares and the promenade – hesitatingly, after the hardships of war and winter. Blanka was offered quarters at some barracks on the outskirts of town.
"That would be all right with me," she said, " but let me try to find a private accommodation first".
She had remembered great-aunt Agatha, a younger sister of grandma Anica, and her husband Lino. Before the occupation the Selingers had not entertained regular contacts with any of them. Blanka didn't even know if Lino was a Jew or not.
From time to time they had visited Agatha on their way to or from their vacations on the seaside. Blanka remembered the cozy apartment - right opposite of a big newspaper stand on the main promenade.

When she looked out for this newspaper stand, it was still there. And she found the apartment without any difficulty.

Blanka climbed the narrow stairs to the second floor and knocked at the door. After a while she heard shuffling steps inside. “Who is there?” a frail voice asked. “It’s me, Blanka! » she replied. “Blanka who?” the voice inquired. “Blanka Selinger!”
The door opened, but only a slit wide. It was locked by a chain from the inside. An old, wrinkled face with wide, somewhat anxious eyes appeared. Both Agatha and Blanka had some difficulty to recognize each other.
But then a smile appeared in the old face; Agatha removed the chain and opened the door completely.
“My God, it really is you. Come in, come in!” she exclaimed, turned her back and shouted:” Lino, come here quickly! You won’t believe it! Blanka, Bertha’s daughter, has come from Zagreb!” Apparently this was the only place the old woman could think of in conjunction with Bertha and her family.

An old man hobbled into the small anteroom, with a glass of red wine in his hand. Blanka recognized him immediately. Lino still had preserved his striking similarity with the Italian King Vittorio Emanuele. This similarity had been the subject of so many jokes in the good old times. And the glass was proof enough of his ongoing passion for good Dalmatian wine.
They all embraced and went into the tiny kitchen.

“Well, it is simply fantastic to see you alive and well”, Blanka said a little later. They were sitting on simple wooden chairs in the small living room.
Blanka had changed into aunt Agatha’s only housecoat. The uniform had been brushed thoroughly and was hanging at the window-frame to be exposed to the breeze blowing from the sea. Agatha had taken the rest of the clothing, put it to soak and washed it. It was left hanging to dry on the washing-line at the balcony.
The great-aunt had prepared some more hot water, and Blanka had enjoyed her first bath for weeks. She had washed and rinsed her hair and hid it now under a big towel, which she had twisted around her head.
Lino had laid the table with a white linen cloth, their last pieces of good cutlery, glasses for everybody and some rustic dishes. He had composed a simple dinner with the things he was able to find in the kitchen. And he had filled two really impressive jars – one with fresh water and the other one with his favorite drink – Dalmatian wine.
“Be careful,” he told Blanka. “That is Dingac, very heavy. We don’t want to make you drunk.”

There was a lot to talk about. Blanka gave an extensive report of the last years and of what had happened to the Selinger family. Agatha and Lino listened patiently, interrupting her only with a short question or with some exclamations of incredulity.
And then, over homemade sweets and some tea, it was Blanka's turn to listen. She was curious since she hadn't known the great-aunt and her husband too well. After all, she had been a teenager during her previous stays and not much interested in the tales of elder people.

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Agatha and Lino were in their late sixties now. They had married in Trieste around the turn of the century, where Lino had been working as one of the harbormasters. To her astonishment Blanka found out that Lino had had a Jewish father and a catholic mother.
"No wonder that nobody ever spoke about your marriage in the family," she exclaimed. "Well, nobody came to the festivity," Agatha remarked sadly," with the exception of my mother. In those times it was very difficult to accept a couple, which was not 'strictly kosher', so to speak."
" Well, I have encountered a few examples of Jewish rigour myself. But we have visited you here in Rijeka and had fun together!" Blanka still was puzzled.
Lino poured out some more Dingac and offered an explanation. "Perhaps your mother had not been told about it," he said, " or the family had simply suppressed the event..." "Listen, Lino", Blanka interrupted him emphatically. "I wouldn't have had the slightest difficulty with your marriage. But tell me, how have you survived the last years? It must have been very difficult for you!"

"Lino will tell you, while I go to the kitchen to prepare some more tea for us. I think that we have had enough wine". Agatha got up and left the room.
" We came to Rijeka about ten years ago," Lino continued. "The harbormaster had died, and I took his job until I went into retirement in 1940. We liked Rijeka very much and decided to stay here. The port authority has paid me a pension until now, even after the Italians had taken over."
"And," he continued with a smile, "I had no difficulty to get an Italian passport since I had grown up in Trieste and spent most of my life there.".
"But Agatha", Blanka interrupted him," hasn't she been in danger?" Her great-aunt came back from the kitchen with a big pot of fresh tea and some cups. When she had filled them up she took over where her husband had stopped:

"You know, I have always kept a low profile. Lino's professional position was quite exposed, and I didn't want to create unnecessary problems for him. We have no children. As a consequence we never had to decide about a Jewish or a non-Jewish education. And very few people know that I am Jewish."

"And you have never been persecuted in any way?" Blanka inquired. Lino set the cup down and replied:" Everything was nice and easy until the early summer of 1943. At that time there were too many Jewish refugees in Dalmatia, even for the Italians' taste. That is why the authorities asked all the Jews to register. They were bound to move to a central camp on Rab Island or Arbe as the Italians call it."
"I think I have been there on a trip with my parents," Blanka remarked as Lino continued:
„ We have heard later on that more then three thousand Jews were sent to that camp, together with many more Slovenes and other people. We decided not to register. We were no refugees, had first-class papers and were not known to have Jewish blood in our veins. Well, nobody came to look for us and we continued as if nothing had happened."

"But then the Germans took over! What happened to you? And what happened to those poor people on Rab Island?" Blanka was a little excited. The red wine had had its effect. "Patience, young lady," Lino said." That is just what I wanted to tell you. The Germans have been here only for a short period of time. They tried hard to detect all the Jews who had stayed in town. But they never found us – thank God!
As far as the people in the Arbe camp were concerned – well, that is a different story. The transfer of the Jews had been completed only some days before Mussolini was toppled by Badoglio."
"And then the inmates were set free?" Blanka asked. Agatha shook her head, while Lino, visibly annoyed by too much tea, poured himself another glass of wine.
"No, unfortunately not. After what we have heard by people who have been down there, the Italians couldn't make up their minds. They didn't want to let those people fall in the hands of the Ustasha or to see them joining Tito's partisans. As a consequence they decided to do nothing – at least for the moment.
And then the Italians surrendered to the Allies and the Germans took over within a matter of days".
"Well, the same thing happened in Lido di Camaiore," Blanka interjected. "It was quite horrible!" "But you have not been in a camp", Lino said admonishingly. "On Rab Island everybody had to decide very quickly.

All the Slovenes and almost all the Jews went to mainland Dalmatia and joined the partisans or went into partisan-controlled territory. Only about two hundred Jews decided to stay in the camp – for better or for worse.
Well, the Germans brought all of them to Auschwitz where they have perished...."

After a long and oppressing silence Blanka said: " Arbe, Arbe – that name rings a bell somewhere. Wait – hasn't there been formed an 'Arbe Brigade' in our army? I have heard about it but never met those people!"
"You are right," Agatha answered, and there seemed to be some pride in her voice. "The former inmates of the camp formed this 'Arbe Brigade'. One battalion, the Fifth, is entirely composed by Jewish fighters. The other four consist mainly of Slovenes".

Blanka shuddered slightly. How close together escape and capture, life and death had been! And how luckyly they had survived in their Italian hiding-places! On the other hand: Wouldn't it have been great to be together with those Jewish soldiers?

They talked for another while and then they went to bed. The old people were quite exhausted and Blanka felt completely worn out as well. She lay down on the couch in the living room and drew a woolen blanket over her. Many thoughts went through her head; but she was very tired and fell sound asleep after a while.

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Blanka spent the next four days with her relatives. She cleaned the apartment thoroughly, did the laundry and went shopping. They would take strolls on the promenade, enjoy the sunshine and meet some old friends of Lino's.
And then she had to say good-bye and show up at the barracks. The end of her leave and of some peaceful days had come.

The trip back to her battalion was a short one this time. The unit was deployed in the eastern part of the Istria peninsula. The real job had already been done; the Germans had been driven out of the area.
Yet, there were small groups of Ustasha militiamen and similar gangs, which still put up some fighting. The battalion had to mop up pockets of resistance here and there. Not a big thing anymore, but it had to be done.

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And then the war was over. When they got the news up in the Istrian hills, they decided to have a big party. The village people joined it with lots of wine, slivovica and other drinks. There was a lot of singing and dancing. It was the only time in her whole life that Blanka got tipsy to a serious extent.

But her military service was far from over. It took the new Yugoslav authorities a few months before they had established the infrastructure of a regular army. And until then many partisans had to serve.
The weeks in Istria were long and boring. Furthermore, Blanka got no real leave. And a day off did not help very much since Zagreb was much too far away for a short trip. Rudolf was exactly in the same situation. His work and studies kept him busy.

Thank God, the postal service improved rapidly, and once or twice they were connected via the field telephone.
And then, one morning in late August, she was summoned by the commander. She got her pay. The commander asked her to write her own discharge papers. He thanked her for all her excellent services and asked her to stay for a few days to help him with some necessary paperwork. The two embraced – his pass at her had been forgotten a long time ago.

Blanka was no longer a soldier. Some days later a truck brought her back to Rijeka, another one to Ljubljana. Another night in the barracks, and then she took the morning train to Zagreb. She regained her hometown the same way she had left it almost four years ago.

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THE WAR IS OVER AND A FAMILY IS DISPERSED

A new beginning and a first nasty surprise

Blanka went to “her” apartment straight from the railway station. It seemed only natural to go there first. What else do you do when you come home?
It still appeared to be the old house; nothing had changed as far as she could see. It was only when she was looking at the windows of her former apartment that Blanka thought: “Something is different”. Well, the house had not changed – still the same gray and adorned façade, the tall windows and the broad, elegant entrance. Only the small garden in front of it was overgrown a little bit.
No – the house had not changed. It was Blanka who had changed. She had left home as a teenager. She came back as a woman and with a lot of mental luggage at that. And as it has happened to so many people returning from war she felt like an intruder.

Yet, in the end and with a little reluctance she rang the bell of Mr. Guttman’s apartment. Guttman had built the house as a young architect and was its owner. His daughter, slightly older than Blanka, had been one of her closest friends.
The automatic door opened with a click and Blanka climbed the stairs she knew so well. Guttman stood in the open door of his apartment. She recognized him immediately, and so did he with the sharp eye of the architect. He welcomed her wholeheartedly and asked her to come in. They sat down at the kitchen table and Guttman produced some fresh fruit juice. When they had talked about their respective experiences he told her that he had rented the Selinger apartment quite a while ago and that an engineer now was living there with his family.
“I guess that you acted correctly,” Blanka said with a sad smile, “since we had cancelled our lease at the end of 1941. But do you know what happened to our belongings?” The architect shook his head. “As far as I know the Rublikovs took care of them when the new tenant moved in.”
“Well, then I will have to ask there,” Blanka said. She remembered that the Rublikovs had taken their carpets and their silverware into custody. It seemed only natural that they would have taken the rest as well to keep it for the Selingers.

She said good-bye to Mr. Guttman, went down to the ground floor, past her old apartment and knocked at the door of the Rublikovs. She had to knock twice until the door opened.
Mrs. Rublikova looked at her with a blank face, but Blanka was sure that the woman had recognized her immediately, as well as the daughter who was standing right next to her mother. “Yes, what do you want ?” the woman asked in a harsh whisper. “ I am Blanka Selinger. Don’t you recognize me?” she asked.

Mrs. Rublikova lifted her eyes slowly and gave her a long level look. Her head did not move and her gray, short hair was sitting on it like a rock. "Ah, well, Blanka Selinger..." she said dreamingly and without the slightest smile. "And what can I do for you?"
"I thought - " Blanka started to say and stopped cold. She had met the eyes of the daughter, and these eyes were cold as dark glass. Why don't they ask me to come in? Blanka wondered. And then she asked what had become of their belongings. When she had finished Mrs. Rublikova said in a flat voice: " I don't know what you are talking about. Your people have never given us anything and we haven't taken anything, either".

Blanka was shocked by the most blatant lie of her life. And she was scared by the blank, cold stare of those two women. She started to talk about the carpets, the silverware, her father's cabinet and all the other beautiful things the Selingers had to leave behind.
The daughter cut her short. „We don't know what you are talking about. And now good-bye". And then she closed the door with a loud bang.

Blanka swallowed and gasped for breath. There was nothing she could do against this insolence - at least not for the time being. She climbed the stairs to Mr. Guttman's apartment again and knocked at the door. When he opened it he was terrified. "My God, Blanka, what has happened ? You are absolutely pale!"
When she had been offered a seat she couldn't help but sob. Guttman was mad with rage after he had listened to her experience. "These bitches," he shouted. "Well, the authorities will help you. You have been a partisan!" But then he added hesitatingly: " You will have to be careful, however. The man down there seems to be a rather big shot with our new rulers."

"I couldn't care less," Blanka retorted. „I will teach them a lesson as soon as I find the time. These matters can wait for a few days.
I will have to find my husband first. By the way," she said," do you know somebody where we could stay until we will have found an apartment of our own ?"

Mr. Guttman thought things over and smiled: " There is my sister-in-law, Mrs. Frank. She should have some space in her house. And – she is a first-class cook as well." He got a piece of paper and a pencil from the drawer of the kitchen table and wrote down the address. " I am sure she will help you for a while," he said.

Blanka and Rudolf reunited

The day before she left her battalion for Zagreb, Blanka had received another letter from Rudolf. She tore the envelope off impatiently. News from her beloved husband! She read the letter over and over again, as she had done with all previous ones.
Well – he had been made a firm promise of a further military promotion. That was something to be proud of. He was still living in the students' quarters on the grounds of "his" hospital. "And I am working here," he had added ,"as if I were a real doctor". The combined effort of his medical studies and a few hours of work with the patients was considerable. Yet, the army paid for everything and he needed some practice to go with his academic career anyhow.

All that was not a dream, and it definitely was not her American dream. But it was important for her husband. At the moment, that was what counted the most. And what counted even more: Rudolf was in good shape and was longing for her!
Blanka considered writing him back. But the letter would have taken to much time. And she was going to Zagreb anyway!

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She rushed into his arms. And then they kissed again and again, holding each other in a long embrace. They didn't hear the cheers or the applause coming from some bystanders and the guards at the doors of the military hospital. After long and interminable months they were reunited.
Finally, Rudolf looked into her eyes and said with a radiating smile :" And from now on, we will never be separated again. We will build our life, and we will do it together!"
And Blanka forgot everything about the USA and about what she had wanted to explain to him. With moist eyes she simply told him how much she loved him, and that everything would be wonderful from now on.

She had come all the way from downtown Zagreb to the hills where the hospital and the students' quarters were located. When she arrived at the gates she had to wait for more than an hour.

The guard had taken the telephone and asked for Lieutenant Kandel. Sorry, a nurse had told him, but comrade Kandel was in the middle of a complicated chirurgical operation. He would come as soon as it was possible.
And finally she watched her husband turning around the corner of a large building made out of red bricks. When he arrived, he was wearing a white overall, and some tiny red spots of blood showed that he just came from surgery.

They sat down on a bench next to the entrance gate. It was a beautiful and sunny day. Early autumn in Zagreb, and for a moment the last years had vanished. It was as if they were sitting somewhere in a park before the war. They laughed, hugged and kissed each other. It was one of the happiest moments in their lives.
It was Blanka who broke the spell. She told him about Mrs. Frank and that they should live there until they found their own apartment. Rudolf said hesitatingly :" I am very sorry, but I can't come with you that easily. For the moment I have to live here on the hospital compound. I think, however, that they will let me go as soon as we have found an apartment. And I am sure that I will get a day or two off tomorrow. Is that good enough for you?"

Blanka didn't look absolutely satisfied, but she nodded approvingly. "Yes, my love, it is. I understand that you are on duty here. And I will look for a dwelling as of tomorrow". Rudolf wrote down Mrs. Frank's address. They kissed again and then he left for the hospital buildings.
Blanka walked back to town and found Mrs. Frank who was very willing to sublet two rooms in her home for a small fee. Rudolf arrived the next day, late in the afternoon. It was little time they had together. But it was a very precious time, and they spent it as if it had been their second or third honeymoon, interrupted only by the excellent meals prepared by their landlady who turned out to be a very good cook, indeed.

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It was only a short distance from Mrs. Frank's home to Town Hall. A new era should have begun there, since a partisan administration had taken over – partisans as they had been themselves only a few months ago. Nevertheless, the woman in the porter's cabin wore a uniform and showed a stern face without any smile on it.

And when she asked them in an official voice what office they were looking for, Blanka couldn't help but think :"My God, she is not behaving any better than any civil servant I have met in Italy! If I had behaved in such a way at my office in Rome, they would have fired me right away."

To her astonishment Rudolf remained very kind; apparently he considered such a behavior as part of the labor pains of a new and better society. When they had explained that they needed an apartment (and as partisans they were entitled to it), they were told: " Second floor, office 35!" Blanka got infuriated and said in German, clacking her heels :" Zu Befehl!" The receptionist barely looked up with her cold, gray eyes looked into an imaginary void and said nothing.
The corridors were dark and untidy and when they arrived at their office of destination they were asked for some patience since a couple of other people was waiting already. They went down again and had a look at the big, dark-green board close to the entrance door, which had a lot of information pinned to it. After a while, Blanka, who had been looking at the contact messages, exclaimed: "Rudolf, look! Here is your old friend Zdenka Steiner or Brichta as she is called now! " Rudolf came closer. Indeed, Zdenka had left a message and was asking for all of her friends to contact her. She had left the address of a house in the eastern part of Zagreb's city center.

They wrote down the address and returned to "second floor, office 35". A friendly man who had not yet forgotten that "comrade" was an honorable form of address listened to their story and took note of the necessary details. He looked into a list of available apartments, smiled and said : " Here is something for you – a furnished apartment in Biankinijeva Street. It has been left behind by an Ustasha official and his wife. I have to clear some legal items, but you may move there in about a fortnight." It was only later that they would find out that these people had fled Zagreb during the last days of the war and had been killed in the Maribor massacre.

Zdenka – at least one old friend!

The old woman had prepared a simple dinner and two big pots of tea. "I will go to bed," she said with her heavy German accent.

"I have a weak heart condition and could not stand a long talk about grisly events and details".

Blanka and Rudolf had arrived at Zdenka's place in late afternoon. A gray-haired woman with a wrinkled face had opened the door, had welcomed them and let them in. "Zdenka still is at work, "she said and gave her name as Gertrud. "But she should be here in about an hour." While they waited, the woman told them where they were. It was the house of Zdenka's great-aunt who had quite successfully run a needlework atelier and shop before the war. This lady had escaped the persecution of the Ustasha and the SS, but she had died roughly a year ago. Gertrud – of Austrian origin – had been a housemaid for this aunt and had stayed in the house, simply because there was no other place to go.
When Zdenka had come back from the war, she had come here, since her old apartment , which had been occupied by Eichmann's henchman, had been vandalized and badly damaged by partisans looking for revenge. To her great distress she learned that her great-aunt had died as well. Gertrud tried to comfort this young woman with the sad face and invited her to stay.

And then Zdenka returned home, saw Rudolf and Blanka, gasped , grew pale like a bed-cloth and stuttered: " Rudolf! Blanka! Finally, some friends!" She hugged and kissed both of them abundantly. " Let me freshen myself up and recover a little bit," she asked. " Gertrud will serve dinner in the meantime, and then we can start talking."
And a long talk it was, filled with grisly events and details. When Rudolf and Blanka had finished with their tale, it was Zdenka's turn.

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"Well, dearest friends, where do I start?" she asked hesitatingly. "Please start way back in 1941. How did you leave Croatia?" Rudolf invited her. Zdenka smiled. It was the first smile they had seen on her rather taut face since she had arrived.
" It may seem curious, but my story is very close to the one I have heard from Rudolf. My father, my mother, my sister Mira, my husband Fritz Brichta and his brother had all been deported to the camps. I was the only one left to use the good services of Signor Passi, our 'escape assistant', as Rudolf has put it. In a train, we passed the border to the Italian-controlled territories on the coast.

My companion had hid me under a big blanket. He pretended that I was his daughter, sick and asleep. That is how he got me through."
"But you didn't come to Lubljana," Blanka interjected. "No," Zdenka answered. "I stayed in Susak , close to Rijeka. There were many Jews, and Tito's party secretly started to recruit members. Be assured that I was not a convinced Communist, neither then nor now. However, I yearned for some company and a little solidarity. That is why I joined the Communist Youth Organization".
Rudolf put the cup on the table. He knew that his next question would hurt Zdenka very much – he had seen it in her face. But the question had to be asked. "What, Zdenka, happened to your family ?"

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Zdenka breathed heavily and did not answer at first. She was visibly fighting her deep emotion and her tears. And then she said in a voice barely audible :" They are all dead."
Although they had feared the worst Rudolf and Blanka were shocked and moved. Blanka got up, went around the table and embraced Zdenka without saying a word. All words would have been futile, anyhow! When their friend had gathered enough strength she went on hesitatingly and with many interruptions:
" The Ustasha brought my husband and his brother to the provisional concentration camp on Pag Island. They have been murdered there in the summer of 1941, before the Italians took control of the island.
My father, my mother and my sister Mira have been deported to Jasenovac. I have been in contact with them for a few months. In November of that year I have been informed that my father had 'died from pneumonia'. In other words – he has either been killed or tortured or starved to death. My mother and my sister ? I don't know where and when they have perished. But in 1943 I have met a woman who is sure to have seen both of them boarding a SS-train to the East".

Pain overwhelmed her. Zdenka stopped talking, trembled, sobbed and then cried desperately. Blanka couldn't help crying either, and even Rudolf was not ashamed of his tears. They held each other in a long and silent embrace. And then Zdenka said solemnly : "May their martyrdom be blessed forever!"

Blanka and Rudolf wanted to go and leave Zdenka in peace. It was her who insisted that her guests stay for a while. Apparently, she did not want to be left alone in despair and with all those dark memories. During the next hour she told the rest of the story. In Susak the Italians had started a systematic search for Jews without papers. Those who were found were sent to Croatia and into the avid claws of the Ustasha. Only later on, when the unbelievable atrocities of their formal "Allies" became known, did the Italians change attitude and started to help the Jews systematically.

Zdenka was given Catholic papers, so that she was rather safe. And during the winter she decided to join the partisans. She helped out in a medical unit, just like Blanka had done, and helped Tito's army until the end of the war.
And when she came back to Zagreb, she found the apartment of her family vandalized and badly damaged.
That is why she had looked for shelter with her great-aunt only to find out that she had died as well. She had been released from the army in June.

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It was past midnight before Zdenka went to bed, before Rudolf accompanied Blanka to Mrs. Frank's home and then gained his quarters in the early hours of the morning. Nobody found sleep that night. They had renewed an old friendship. But it was then – and only then! – that Rudolf and Blanka fully realized how many relatives and friends had gone forever.

The dispersal of a family is always an anti-climax

I think it was that evening, which brought an end to their part in the history of war and persecution, of suffering and survival, of mass-murder and human courage, which was labeled "Holocaust" or "Shoah" later on. Life slowly came back to normal. Day-to-day problems had to be solved, trivial events replaced drama, career and "future" took the place of deeply felt solidarity.

Who are we to criticize such a development? Nobody is made for continuous excitement. We all long for normalcy. Why should it have been different for the Kandels and the Selingers?
The gigantic funnel called Fate had spat them out into all directions. The rest is a rather sober documentation of rather banal human condition :

Bertha and Zivko Selinger

They stayed in Rome where Zivko continued to work in Cinecittà, the "Italian Hollywood". In 1949, both of them and their son Otto immigrated into the USA. Bertha worked as an office assistant, whereas Zivko took up a job with the US production units of "Radio Free Europe". He died shortly afterwards, not yet 60 years old.
Bertha moved close to her sisters in New York. She maintained a close correspondence with her daughter and sent many welcome parcels to Zagreb. She visited the family several times; the last visit took place when the Kandels were already living in Hamburg.
Bertha died in New York in 1973 when she was 74 years old. Both Bertha and Zivko are buried in a Jewish cemetery at the very northern end of Manhattan Island.

Cecilia and Mavro Kandel

When Rudolf and Blanka had joined the ranks of the partisans the Kandels were left alone in Rome. They had a friendly contact with the Selingers – and that was about all the contacts they had.
And then – in 1947 or 1948 - they immigrated to Mexico where their daughter Sophia and their son-in-law Walter Eisner had arrived after a long wandering, including a detour to Cuba. They lived in Mexico City, not far from Sophia's house.
Interestingly enough both Cecilia and Mavro applied for and obtained the Yugoslav nationality. They were convinced that the "Communist nightmare" would not last for very long and that they would return to Zagreb.
Mavro worked as an accountant with a large U.S. company, but he died only three years later, when he was 64 years old. He had never fully recovered from his weak heart condition, which developed into a deadly infarct.
For a while Cecilia stayed with her daughter, but then she came back to Zagreb.

She had serious troubles with her eyes, her son was a medical doctor, and there was a functioning health insurance system in Yugoslavia, quite different from the situation in Mexico.
My wife Sonja shared a room with her before Rudolf found her a small studio. Cecilia was appalled by the poor living conditions in post-war Zagreb. But she learned to live with them quite well.
She was a dignified and well-educated lady. It was through her that Sonja became acquainted with the writings of Goethe, Schiller and Heine. And then she developed a deadly cancer of the kidneys. She suffered terribly, endured her fate heroically and died in Rudolf's hospital in April, 1964, 83 years old. She is buried in Zagreb's Jewish cemetery.

Victor Selinger

He survived the war in Switzerland, still doing business for the Schenker hauling company. After a while, he specialized in maritime trading and shipping. He went to Latin America where business looked a lot more promising than in postwar Europe.
Victor set up a flourishing company in Venezuela. He has visited Blanka and Rudolf in Zagreb several times. In 1983 he came to see us in Bonn, where my wife Sonja and me were living at that time. He has died in the early Nineties, more than eighty years old.

Ignatz Kandel

Ignatz escaped to New York, just a few days before Nazi Germany assaulted and occupied France.
After all we know he has led a solitary and lonely life in Queens. He tried to earn some money with lecturing and teaching languages. In his free time, he wrote the first real grammar of the Yiddish language, an achievement, which made him well known in specialized circles. And then, some years after the war, he fell victim to McCarthyism and the witch-hunters. Like so many others he was the object of many pointless and humiliating inquiries.
He died in the early Seventies and is buried on the big, central Jewish cemetery in Queens.

Otto Selinger

When he accompanied his parents to the USA, he finished high school in a hurry and turned out to be an absolutely brilliant student. Supported by

some first-class grants he studied at M.I.T. and later on in Ann Arbor/Michigan.
Otto got his PhD and obtained a professorship in molecular biology. He married a Catholic wife from Nicaragua. They still live in Ann Arbor and enjoy a large and lively family of their own.

Sophia Kandel

When she had arrived in Mexico City, her husband Walter Eisner continued to be active selling the Marvin luxury watches. A short while later, he met an heiress of the Marvin family fortune, fell in love with her and left his wife.
Sophia set up a renowned shop for high-quality clothing in the heart of downtown's business and embassy district. Fortunately enough we have been able to visit her several times. She has sold this shop a few years ago and is still living in Mexico. For decades she has not met her brother Rudolf. And now, it may well be too late.
Walter Eisner, a sick and very old man by now, is living in a beautiful villa close to Geneva in Switzerland, not far away from the shores of the homonymous lake.

Zenka and Böshka Selinger

Zenka, married to Mirko Singer, has survived the war and the Holocaust in her hiding in Milan. She resumed tailoring and opened a new atelier. Her husband tried, as best as he understood it, to manage this business – without much success. When he died a few years later she gave up the atelier and immigrated into the U.S.A. She has lived in New York, with her sister and close to her mother.
Böshka, married to a Jew of Hungarian origin, Paul Lantos, survived in Milan as well. Her husband died shortly after the war. Böshka made it to New York. She has lived there, in the area west of Central Park. She has come to our wedding in 1983, and we have spent a few beautiful days with her in New York. Böshka has died in the late Eighties.
Both sisters are buried together at the northern tip of Manhattan, very close to their sister Bertha and their brother-in-law Jivko.

Zdenka Steiner

Zdenka Steiner, or Zdenka Brichta to be correct, tried to get hold of her father's pulp and paper business. She was soon to learn, however, that

the new rulers had no intention to re-establish a vibrant private sector industry in Yugoslavia. It was their specific brand of collectivism they were striving at.
At the end of the summer Zdenka was finally asked to become the "State manager" of her father's company. She had to find help quickly since she had no experience whatsoever in running a company. She found this help in the person of her father's old associate. This man, who was not a Jew, had worked at the company throughout the war and had retired immediately afterwards.
The company suffered a difficult re-launch; it never made it to more than a quarter of its pre-war activities.
A parallel effort had to be devoted to securing the Steiner's' dispersed private property. Zvonko Mattersdorfer, a rather young Jewish lawyer, helped Zdenka in this effort. He had spent 4 years as a German Prisoner-of-War and had suffered a fate similar to Zivko's.
Zvonko fell in love with Zdenka and proposed her. Zdenka who had deep feelings about Zvonko as well hesitated. Could she marry again when the memory of Fritz Steiner was still burning in her soul ?
She went to see to Fritz' parents and talked to them. Both pushed her gently into the right direction, and the wedding took place in December. The young couple decided to change their name into Novak. "Novo" means "New" in Croatian, and they wanted to stress their resolve to start a new life.

For both of them, the stunning discrepancies between Communist theory and the dull, oppressive reality in Yugoslavia became too much. They yearned for freedom and a more satisfying future for themselves and the baby Zdenka was expecting.
The Novaks went to Israel in November 1948, where they arrived in December 1948. Their son Danny was born two months later. They moved to Hadera on the Mediterranean coast, roughly halfway between Tel Aviv and Haifa. Fruit of Lavoslav's foresight : Initially they were able to live on the revenues from the citrus grove Zdenka's father had had bought ten years earlier.
When they had found regular jobs they moved to Haifa. Zvonko died in the early nineties, and Zdenka still lives in her small apartment on Carmel Mountain with its stunning view over the harbor and the bay. By the way: Zdenka Brichta is living there as well, just around the corner.

Rudolf and Blanka

When they arrived at their apartment in Biankinijeva Street they were quite appalled. The Ustasha family, which had "resided" here before, had left everything in a horrible condition. All the rooms were caked with dirt. The furniture was more than scarce, and a big wooden tub dominated the living room. It had been used to produce homemade pickled cabbage and the smell was nauseating, even after a few months.
Yet, it was their apartment! During the next days Blanka proceeded to a thorough overhaul. Rudolf came with special food-rations from the hospital, and after a week or so they moved into their own four walls. The apartment was embellished gradually with furniture, carpets and other items, which had belonged to Rudolf's parents and which he had been able to recover. And after a while and some barely disguised threats from City Hall, even the Rublikovs "discovered" some of the things they had been given in custody by Bertha and Jivko.

The time had come to pursue a more normal family life and a professional career.

Blanka went to the "Partisan Gymnasium", located in the buildings of an old Protestant school. In 1946 she obtained her baccalaureate with very good marks. Immediately afterwards she enrolled at the university to study pharmacology. In 1949 she had to interrupt her academic career since she was pregnant. Having resumed her studies in 1953 she concluded them in 1955 with the title of a Magister Pharmaciae. Afterwards Blanka worked in a renowned laboratory specialized in food research and control.

Rudolf continued his double activity, working in the military hospital and preparing his medical studies. In 1950, he achieved a double PhD in chirurgical and in orthopedic medicine, both with the highest distinctions. He continued to pursue his career in the Military Hospital and was made Colonel somewhat later on.

In 1954, the Kandels moved from Biankinijeva Street into a larger and more modern apartment in 7, Svetozar Markovic Street. They needed some extra space.

Sonja, their beloved daughter and my beloved wife, was growing rapidly. Furthermore, Rudolf's mother had fallen seriously ill and was bound to return.

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All in all, the Kandels led a normal life – almost normal, to be more precise.
They liked their hometown and the many new friends they had encountered after the war. They had to care for Cecilia and wanted their daughter to enjoy stable surroundings.
On the other hand the difficult reality in Tito's Yugoslavia started to bear on them heavily.

Blanka had become totally disenchanted quite early. It became obvious to her that the "class-less" structure of Yugoslavia was a class society like all the others – even more so. The reign of unqualified bureaucrats became more stifling all the time. The civil liberties were limited to an intolerable degree.
She accepted that Tito's Yugoslavia was a lot better off than Stalin's Soviet Union. She acknowledged the high quality of the education system and the fact that ethnic cleavages played a lesser role than before the war (although a hidden form of Serb supremacy was to be felt almost everywhere).
But when Otto or Sophia wrote about the living conditions in the USA or Mexico, when her mother-in-law came back and uncle Victor came to visit them, when she accompanied Rudolf to a conference in Milan she developed quite different benchmarks.
In the beginning she arranged herself, of course. As a born optimist she had learned to make the best out of circumstances. But her dreams had gone elsewhere definitely!

On the other hand, Rudolf was not ready to shed his dreams that easily. He tried to convince himself that an extended period of "mopping up", of overcoming the residues of an old authoritarian era was necessary. It would take some time until he had to acknowledge that his dreams had been illusions.
He was still ready to adapt. But it did not happen out of conviction; it happened out of resignation.

He was still able to drown his doubts in hard work. After a while however, his resignation grew into some form of “internal emigration”.

And he looked around as well.
There was the conference in Milan. There was a trip to London where he had been a member of a Yugoslav medical team.
And then he joined a Yugoslav military delegation to the U.S.A. in 1961. Those days in Baltimore, a brief visit to his brother-in-law in Ann Arbor and the tales of his sister who had come over from Mexico City added to his frustration.
When he returned to Zagreb he had to fully agree with Blanka: Corruption, intrigue, nepotism and a hidden discrimination against Jews were to be found everywhere.

Some months later the director of the military hospital went into retreat. Rudolf, his deputy and meeting all the necessary qualifications, would have been a natural successor. Everybody agreed on that! But he was pushed aside by an outsider, an apparatchik who seemed to be more reliable in political terms.
That was it! Rudolf and Blanka broke with Titoist Yugoslavia.

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In the mid-sixties a considerable lack of qualified medical doctors had developed in Germany. Hospitals and headhunters were looking for suitable specialists. Rudolf was approached.
After some hesitation (he had been offered a position in Sweden as well) he accepted. He went to Hamburg; Blanka and Sonja followed some months later. Given their specific family background German citizenship was accorded to them quite quickly. Interestingly enough, though, Rudolf did not give back his Yugoslav passport at first. He did so only in the Seventies, when Sonja started working in Washington D.C. The black memories of the Cold War and of the McCarthyist excesses were still at work.
Rudolf worked at a private clinic and then set up his own practice. And Blanka started working as a pharmacist.
They joined Hamburg’s Jewish community and – in the end – moved into a nice and spacious apartment in one of the city’s more fashionable Western suburbs. And that is where they still live, after Rudolf has given up his professional activities in 1986.

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A last event merits to be mentioned:
In the late Fifties Blanka and Rudolf were attending a dinner party given by one of their friends. They were presented to a judge and chatted about the years in hiding. When they told him about the specific circumstances of their marriage in Milan, the judge looked at them quite startled, laughed and clapped his hands in pleasure. “You know what?” he said. “Under Yugoslav law you are not married at all. And while you are not living in sin, you are living in illegitimacy! In formal terms your daughter is a natural child”.
Rudolf and Blanka were deeply terrified. They simply had forgotten! The next morning they went to the registry office – and married again. Only this time there was no fine luncheon at Savini’s.

(Final Status before linguistic control: February,2002)

EPILOGUE

In June 1996, Blanka and Rudolf accompanied me on a visit to Israel. We went to Yad Vashem. The bright Jerusalem sunshine could not dissipate the grief in our hearts. Both my parents-in-law were quiet and composed. However, you only had to look at their slightly trembling hands to find out what went on in their souls.

We visited the permanent exhibition linked to the Research Center. In a dimly lit room, we came across an old photograph. It showed a large group of laughing young people, all dressed in white sportswear. "Participants in the Tel Aviv Maccabi Games of 1936" said the explanatory note.
Rudolf watched this yellowish piece of paper for a long time and very carefully. He then pointed to one of the athletes and said in a low voice: "I think that's me". He cleared his throat and smiled briefly. He took his wife's hand.

Blanka and Rudolf Kandel had come a very long way.

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